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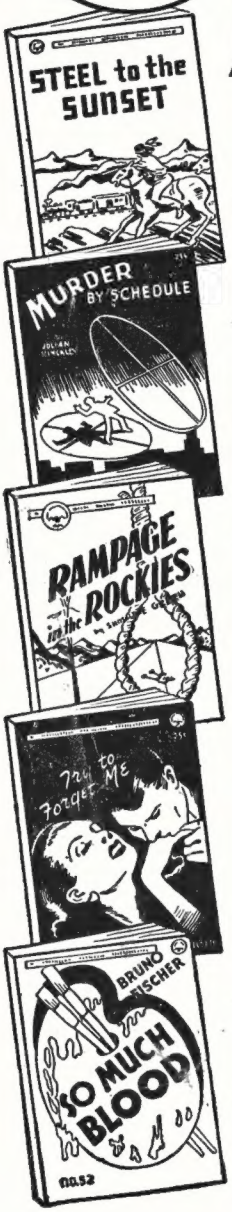

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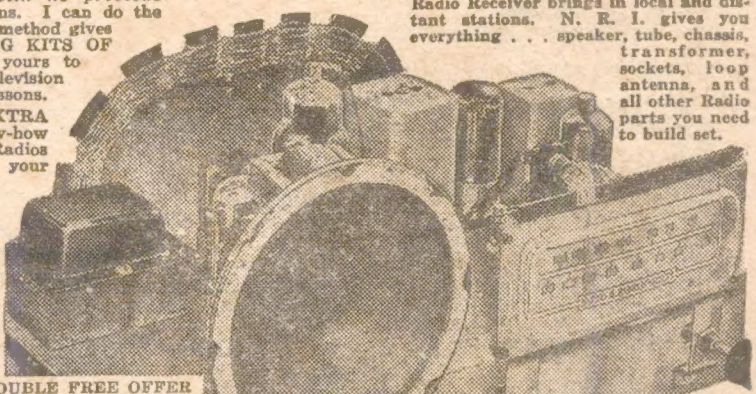

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February, 1949
Vol. 21
No. 1

PRIVATE DETECTIVE STORIES

CONTENTS

Feature Novel, Complete In This Issue

RED-HOT ICE 6
By R. KEENE LEE
The private snoop was only too glad to take five hundred bucks to help a honey-haired beauty, only he didn't know that it was to lead to a trail of blood and violence with Death waiting at the finish in a startling climax.

Action-Packed Novelettes and Short Stories

DEATH SHAPES THE FRAME ..... Joseph Commings 30
It started out only as a frame-up for a divorce, but murder soon poked it's ugly hand into the proceedings and tags a brunette.

TOY OF DOOM ..... H. C. Butler 54
No one could figure out what part the little lavender doll had in the killing of the beautiful singer—until Johnny Diamond acted.

MURDER ON THE BENCH ..... Raymond Drennen, Jr. 72
The gang thinks nothing of intimidation and murder when they are out to steal an election. The old judge was put in a tight spot.

BLAST AND BE DAMNED! ..... Henry R. Wyman 82
Terry West had a tough choice—play with the mob or be blown out of business—then a beautiful gal showed him a way out.

HOMICIDE HORNS IN ..... John Kane 90
The note said, "Leave my man alone or you'll wish you'd never been born!" Only, this gal didn't know which man to leave alone.

REDHEADS SPELL DANGER ..... Hal Cross 104
The private dick went all-out to assist the attractive redhead but when he got into a jam it was the brunette who saved him.

Sixteen Pages of Sensational Private Detective Comics

SALLY THE SLEUTH "Tumbling Corpses" ..... Ad. Barreaux 46
JERRY JASPER "Dance of Death" ..... Ray McClelland 64

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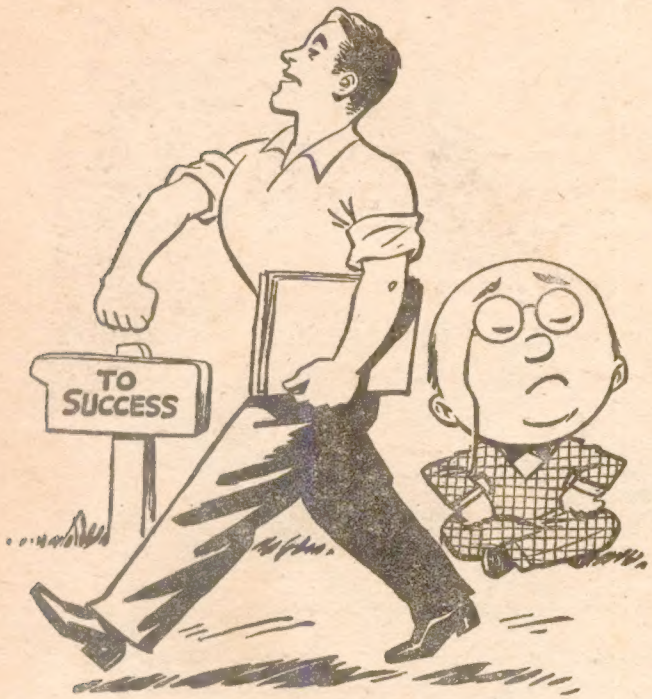
PRIVATE DETECTIVE is published bi-monthly by Trojan Magazines, Inc. Office of publication, 29 Worthington St., Springfield 3, Mass.; Frank Armer, Pres. Editorial and executive offices, 125 E. 46th St., New York 17, N. Y. Re-entry as second class matter applied for at Post Office, Springfield, Mass. Copyright 1948 by Trojan Magazines, Inc. Single copies 25c. Manuscripts should be accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope and are submitted at the author's risk. For advertising rates, address Combined Publishers' Representatives, Inc., 480 Lexington Ave., New York 17, N. Y.

How to pass a genius



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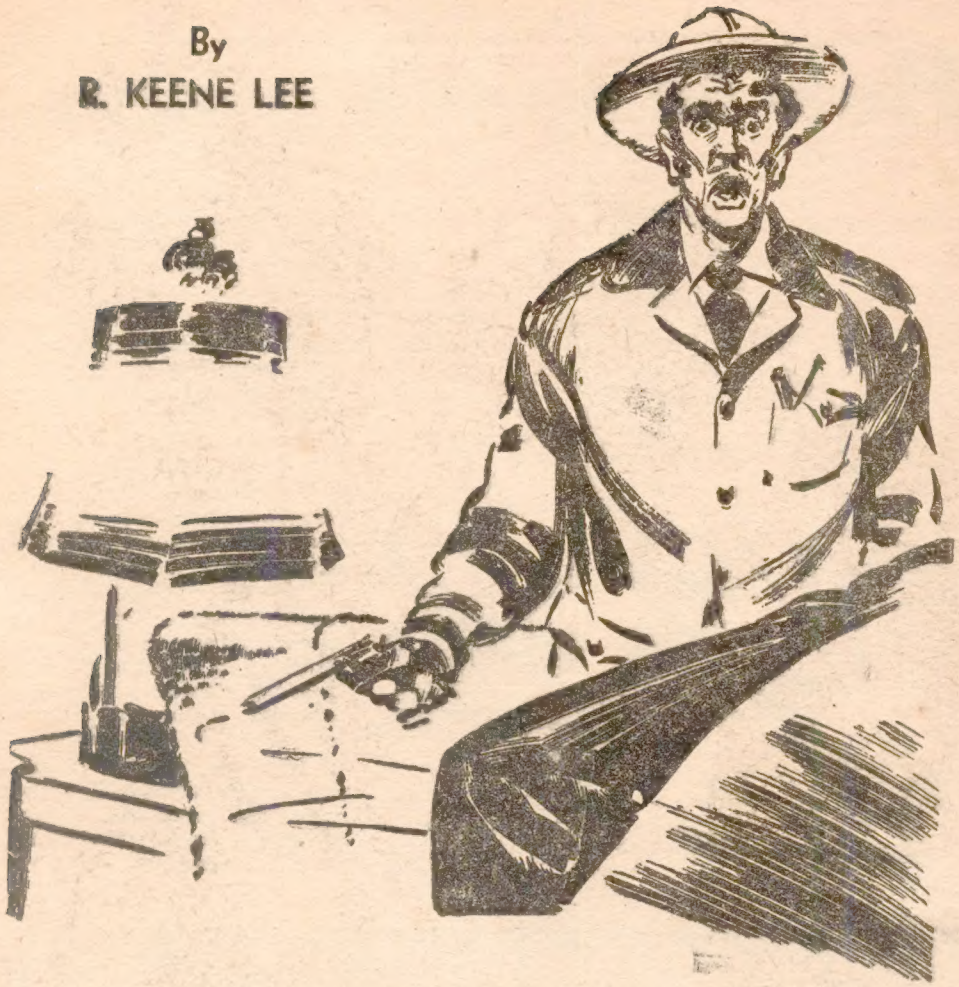


RED-HOT ICE

I COULD hear high heels clicking down the hall. They sounded hurried but not nervous and they were coming my way. I took my hand off the doorknob, turned on the lights and went back into the office. But the time she came through the outer door I had the windows up and my coat off.

"Mr. Fale?" she called.

"Come in, Mrs. Hayes. Have a seat."

I got behind the desk, turned back my cuffs and loosened my tie. I'm a guy that likes lots of air.

"You were leaving," she said, and she couldn't have sounded more amazed if I'd had two heads.

When that honey-haired charmer hired a private snoop to trace the fabulous diamond known as the "Kimberley Rose" she opened up a path of blood and violence that led through the underworld to an astounding appointment with Death!

He was standing there with the gun dangling from his finger as I got my automatic clear

Illustrated by
Joseph Sokoli

"The note said six."

"I couldn't get away, Reporters." She shrugged it off, as though that explained everything. In her case it did.

I waited, rocking the swivel a little. I had a good idea what she wanted but I like to let clients make their own pitch. She took her time, looking me over in that way some dames and all cops have. It was supposed to be cool and impersonal. But it wasn't, quite.

She nodded to herself a couple of times. "You look all right."

"Bless you," I said.

For a moment her temper showed, just below the cheekbones, and her eye-

lids got heavy. Then she reached for a smile and came up with type D. Sporting. Man-to-man. But with enough juice in it to keep me from feeling brotherly.

There was no danger of that. The newspapers hadn't done her justice. They'd caught the widow's peak, the tilted eyes, the shape of the mouth. But they'd missed the color scheme. Think of fresh honey, emeralds and the sort of red that looks moist and you get an idea. Probably the same one I got.

"You know who I am?" she asked.

"I saw the afternoon papers."

"I want you to get it back for me."

"Just a minute, Mrs. Hayes. According to the papers the property stolen was a red diamond. Twenty-five carats. Worth about a quarter of a million. That correct?"

"Yes," she said. "The Kimberley Rose."

"And you want to hire me to find it for you?"

"Not to be monotonous about it—yes."

Cute? In a simple black number that couldn't have cost much over five hundred, and with a shape that would give a blind wolf tonsilitis? Dynamite. The type dame you give half a chance and you end up with size five footprints all over the back of your pinstripe. I'm not that well fixed in pinstripes.

I said, "Why?"

"Because I want it back," she snapped.

"No. Why me?"

"A friend recommended you. He said you had the reputation of being honest and . . . well, ruthless."

"And what else did this friend say?"

"Why nothing. . . . Should he have?"

A shade too surprised, but I let it pass. "I understand you have the diamond insured."

"Naturally. But there's only one Kimberley Rose. Money can't buy another."

"That's not the point. The insurance company will have detectives on the case. Between them and the police, you'll be wasting money hiring me."

"Perhaps," she said. "But it's my money." She took five new bills out of her purse and handed them over. They were all hundreds and sharp enough to cut wood. I tapped them on the desk. Not too hard. It's an old desk.

"My rates are twenty-five a day and expenses. This buys me for quite a while."

"Bring me the diamond and you get another five hundred bonus."

"All right," I said. "Tell it."

SHE took out a gold holder and fitted a cigarette into it. I fished for my Picayunes and slid the Zippo across the desk. She didn't seem to mind my smudging her thumb. She blew smoke over my head and opened with the usual gambit.

"There's really not much to tell. I spent the evening with a friend. I got back to the hotel about one. It must have been an hour or two later that I woke up with a vague feeling that something was wrong, but before I could turn on the bed lamp someone came out of the darkness and held a cloth over my face. Chloroform. When I woke up from that, the Kimberley Rose was gone. I called the desk and they called the police."

"You didn't see the burglar's face?"

"No. It was dark, you understand, and I was still half asleep. But I'm pretty sure it was a man. The hands holding me down felt like a man's hands."

"And nothing but the one diamond was stolen?"

"Nothing but the Kimberley Rose."

I got a file card out of the drawer. I never use 'em but it gives things a business-like air.

"You live in New York, Mrs. Hayes?"

"Philadelphia."

"Your husband in business there?"

"My husband died a few months ago, Mr. Fale. That's the main reason I came to New York. I felt I needed a change of scene."

I put hieroglyphics on the car to cover the silence. "How long have you been here?"

"Since yesterday afternoon."

I glanced up from the card. That statement was a beaut but she didn't

seem to notice anything wrong with it. I fired another Picayune and let the swivel take my back.

"Did you wear the diamond last night?"

"I did. I don't believe in keeping beautiful things in a vault."

"Anybody know you were bringing it with you?"

"If they did, I'm not aware of it."

"Servants maybe. Packing."

She shook her head.

I said, "I don't get along too well with the cops, and I don't owe any insurance companies any favors. I can forget you ever came here." I took the five hundreds out of my wallet.

"What's wrong?"

I told her. "The time element. No jewel man touches a big job without first knowing where he can unload the ice. And with a stone like the Kimberley Rose, that any soda jerk could identify at a glance, that probably means Europe or South America. You only hit town yesterday . . ." I let it die in the air.

"You think I'm lying to you?"

"I'm only telling you how it looks to the cops and the insurance company. Especially the insurance company."

She gave a little laugh that was like feathers tumbling over velvet. "I'm not stupid, Mr. Fale. Although the police were nice, I could tell they weren't very happy with my story. I've resigned myself to being watched and investigated. But in the meantime I want someone, preferably you, out looking for the diamond. What do you say?"

It was just screwy enough to be on the level. I said, "Okay—with the understanding that once I start, I go all the way. I protect a client as much as I can but I don't like anybody trying to make a sucker out of me."

"I rather imagine," she said, "it might be dangerous trying to make a sucker out of you." She stood up. "You can keep this confidential?"

I nodded. "I'll need the name of your friend and a list of the places you went last night."

As my shoulder hit his chest, his arm slammed across my back.

For a minute I thought she was going to clam up. Then she said, "His name is Vincent Oliver. His family were friends of my husband. We had dinner at Charley's on West 46th, went to see *Oklahoma!* and finished the evening with a few drinks at the Club 17."

She looked a little defiant. I steered her to the door. "One more thing, Mrs. Hayes. How would you like your reports—telephoned or written?"

She was standing close and she was wearing a perfume that smelled like the ads read. She gave me that inventory again.

"In person, I think, Mr. Fale."

After she'd gone I went back into the office. The perfume was there, in the air. The five hundred was on the desk. It was six, two and even which had hit me harder.

I SAT down in the swivel and put my feet up. The *News* had a picture of the diamond—a big heart-shaped stone set in a necklace. I tore it out and put it in my wallet next to the fresh centuries. The case might be phony but it was damn profitable—so far.

Outside it was nearly dark, muggy for late spring, and the *Hotel Rooms $1.00 & Up* sign across the street was on. Red neon. A flasher. It came right through the windows and hit the water cooler like a squirt of blood. Maybe I'm nuts but I sorta like it. I turned off the lights and dialed the Elite Bar and Grill.

"This is Fale," I said. "Harry around?"

Milo's bawl and the bar clatter fought it out for a few minutes. Then Harry's voice came over the wire.

"Sam, Harry. I got a job for you. Yeah, paid in advance. Get over to the Ritz-Plaza and find out what gives in the Hayes diamond heist. Yeah. And in your spare time you might check on Mrs. J. Winston Hayes. Philadelphia. Call me tomorrow."

It was getting close to eight but I didn't feel hungry. I decided I might as well look up Vincent Oliver and start earning my dough. He was in the directory, an address on upper Fifth. I pulled down the windows, got my coat and locked the office. There was a Yellow parked at the corner stand.

Heading crosstown I did a little thinking about Mr. Oliver. It's a name that pulls a lot of weight in New York. Or used to. Fiske, Gould and Oliver. Railroads, big dough, the Blue Book. At one time the Olivers ranked up in the first ten of the Four Hundred. But Vince hadn't exactly been holding the line. Around town he's known as a guy who never settles for one blonde when three will do. Maybe he was just an old family friend doing his duty, but after seeing Mrs. Hayes I didn't think so.

The apartment house was gray stone, with a new awning and a doorman in wine and gold, who didn't exactly bloody his forehead on the concrete when I got out of the cab. I don't look upper Fifth and never have, even in my prime.

"Mr. Oliver in?"

"I'm sure I couldn't say." With icicles.

"How sure?" I said, creasing a ten-spot.

HE looked at the bill as though it might need fumigating but he took it. We went into a stainless steel foyer equipped with a speaking tube and some buzzers.

"Mr. Oliver," he said, not letting me see which buzzer he pressed, "there's a man here to see you." He twisted his head and raised his eyebrows at me.

"Fale," I said.

"Mr. Fale," he repeated into the tube and then to me: "Does Mr. Oliver know you?"

"Tell him I'm not a blonde and he don't owe me a cent."

The doorman's face got red but my voice must have carried into the tube. I could hear Oliver's laugh through the headset. Wine-and-gold plainly disapproved of what he had to say:

"Eighth floor. 20. You can go up."

I did. The door was opened by a guy that might've been built of granite, then hit on the head with a hydraulic press. He was dressed in a tux—a five-by-five, but with no fat. His face was all blue jaw and black eyebrow and the lock of hair falling over what passed for his forehead didn't make him look even a little bit boyish.

"Well, well," I said. "Man's closest counterpart. How's crime, Little Angelo?"

"Lay off, peeper," he growled through a throatful of tacks. "Jes lay off the cracks."

He stepped back and I went in side-

When I reached for the stack of chips, I heard a sinister voice behind me.

was so I could keep an eye on him. I'd lent a hand once in sending Little Angelo up for a fur job and he was inclined to be bitter.

Don't mind my butler, Mr. Fale. He suffers from indigestion."

I didn't look at the voice until I got my back against the false mantel. Then I said, "Mr. Oliver?"

He nodded. "What can I do for you?"

He was sprawled back in an easy chair, a tall guy about my age only better preserved. Good looking but a little blurry around the eyes. He was wearing a cream sport shirt monogrammed on the pocket, pale amber slacks and roughed oak moccasins. He seemed to go for crew-cuts and gold wrist chains.

I said, "I'm investigating the robbery. Maybe you can help."

"Robbery?"

I showed him the clipping. "The Kimberley Rose."

"Oh, that one." He gave me a quick grin, picked up the phone from a stand beside him, dialed, and gave me the grin again.

"Mrs. Hayes' apartment, please." He slid down farther on his backbone and draped a leg over the arm of the chair. "Coral, this is Vince. There's a guy here asking questions. Fale. Oh, he is? Well, I just wanted to check. Yes, sure I will."

He took his time pronging the phone. "She tells me you're working for her."

I shrugged.

"She wants me to cooperate," he said. "Isn't that nice?"

I was liking this Oliver less and less all the time. His eyes got lazy and he stretched the grin into a smile that probably made the debutantes choke on their bubble gum. His voice was as soft as kitten's fur.

"Take him, Angelo."

IT didn't sink in until I heard Angelo move. He had his head down into his shoulder so far he had to look at me through his eyebrows, and he was coming fast. For a guy his size, damn fast. And in one hand he had a flat leather sap that looked as big as a spade.

I waited until he was close, then head-faked him left. He checked his rush, showed me a mouthful of store teeth and swung. I pushed off the wall in a dive, low, and as my shoulder hit his chest his arm slammed down across my back. But I was in under—the leather never touched me.

The impact stopped him a second and that was all. He grunted and jerked his arm back for another try. I stepped clear. There was no use wasting time on his jaw. I threw all my one-sixty into a right that caught him on the side of the neck just below the ear.

It should have broken him. It didn't. His top lip rode up over his gums and his eyes squinted in pain, but he stayed up, shaking his head in quick little jerks. I stood there, waiting for him to fall and abruptly he got his eyes focused. The sap flicked out viciously at me.

This time it took me on the shoulder. I felt as though I had blocked a bulldozer. One more like that, anywhere, and I knew I'd be through. There was nothing to do but put my knee where it would do the most good.

He jackknifed, forgetting the sap and everything else, and when he did I had a clear shot at the neck again. I hooked him with everything I had. There was no sound except a half wheeze, half sigh. Still doubled up, he dropped as solidly as a slab of lead. Gradually his legs squeezed out straight against the rug.

I managed to get the gun from beneath his coat with my good hand. The numbness was wearing off and my shoulder felt as though a dentist had packed it with bad teeth and started drilling. When I stood up I was in a bad mood.

Oliver hadn't moved. He was still in the big chair, dangling one leg. He looked like he was getting a helluva bang out of the whole business.

"What's the idea?" I said, bouncing the rod where he could see it.

"Mrs. Hayes is a friend of mine," he grinned. "I just wanted to be sure she had a good man."

"You could have asked."

He swung the leg back in front of him. "Sore?"

I straightened my coat and worked the shoulder a little. There didn't seem to be anything broken. I said, "It would have been more fun with you."

"That's why I pay Angelo." He stood up. "What do you drink?"

"Anything, if you don't have Irish."

He went to a red and silver bar in the corner. While he was mixing I wandered around the room. It was one of those modern jobs—angled walls and low molded furniture. Dust gray with red and silver touches here and there. There was only one picture, a job titled *Nude Descending A Staircase* that looked as though a drunk had been turned loose with ruler and brush. I didn't see any stairs around but I imagined Oliver was pretty well equipped otherwise.

"Scotch is the closest I have," he said, handing me a tall one.

He went back to the big chair and I took its mate.

"All right, Mr. Fale. The questions."

The Scotch was good and I didn't have much to ask him anyway. I drank half of it before I took a breath.

"Mrs. Hayes told me you had dinner at Charley's last night, took in a musical and ended the evening at the Club 17. That right?"

He nodded.

"Do any gambling at 17?"

"I did; she didn't."

"And you got her back to the Ritz about midnight."

"She say that?" He frowned, then shrugged. "Maybe so. I'd have said closer to one."

"Either of you tight?"

"No. I wouldn't say so."

"You took her up to her apartment, of course."

"Sure. What about it?"

"Stay long?"

"Now, look . . ." He stood up. I stood up.

"You wouldn't be getting sore, would you?" I said. "Mrs. Hayes is a client of mine. I like to be sure, too."

He got rosy around the ears but he managed a laugh and took my glass.

"Have another."

I shook my head. Little Angelo was back among us. He had made it to the couch and was sitting there, hunched over, massaging his neck with both hands. He hadn't once taken his eyes off me. I opened the gun, dropped the shells in my pocket and tossed it to Oliver.

"He'll probably hurt himself with it one of these days," I said. "But then, like you say, that's what you pay him for."

Oliver's chuckle followed me to the door. "If you ever need a job," he called, "see me."

"I've got a job," I said. "And I've already seen you." It wasn't the sharpest exit line I ever delivered but then my shoulder was still hurting like hell.

CHAPTER II

Roll of the Dice

CRUISERS were fairly thick on the street and I got one without having to put the bite on Wine-and-gold for a whistle. We turned east at 57th and headed down Third. With the El pillars cutting our paint I felt more at home. I leaned back against the springs and relaxed.

Oliver was one cute cookie any way you looked at it, but he was a damn sight too foxy for a playboy. He'd playe it off the cuff and done a sweet job. Except for one thing: he didn't know me. I was wondering now who Honey Hair's other friend was.

"Here you are, buddy."

I paid off the cabby and got out. The Elite Bar and Grill was one of those old dark places—panelled, sawdusted and spittooned. Their steaks were thick and their jiggers were still three parts whiskey, one part glass. I went to the end booth. Milo came over with milk and tabasco.

"Your sign's out again," I said.

"Is that a fact?" He grinned. As far as Milo was concerned there were just two kinds of people—those that knew about the Elite and those that didn't. He didn't believe in advertising.

He said, "What'll it be?"

"Steak sandwich. Medium. And buy yourself something; I wanna talk."

While he was rustling the cow I shook a few drops of tabasco into the milk, tasted it and added two more. It's my favorite ulcer remedy—the milk to soothe em, the tabasco to burn 'em out. It don't work but it tastes good. By the time I finished the glass, Milo was back.

I took a healthy cut at the steak and after I'd winked that it was all right, he said, "Whaddaya wanta talk about?"

"17," I said with my mouth full of meat.

"The new joint in the Village?"

I nodded.

He took a slug of the rye he'd brought, a red-faced Irishman with meaty hands

and silver hair. He was one of the few big men I ever saw that looked good in a derby.

"Run by a guy nobody ever heard of," he said "name o' Cantrell. Smooth and, I hear, drawing plenty of uptown trade."

"How're the games?"

Milo shrugged. "He brought in Gerard from Hollywood to run the crap table."

"I see." Gerard was the best stick-switch man in the business. I thought a minute. "This Cantrell in okay?"

"I don't think so. But the boys don't want to start nothin' and get everybody closed down. They figure he's small stuff."

I cleaned up the plate and put the glass on it. "I'm loaded for a change. How much do I owe you?"

Milo carried his books in his head, complete with adding machine. "Sixty-five."

I paid him, got a cigar and a fresh pack of Picayunes at the bar and went out. Another cab took me down to 14th and Fourth and I walked over to the corner newsstand thinking that big retainers were sure easy on the feet.

"Merry Christmas, Santa," I said. "Still voting for McKinley?"

The old man turned around. "Well, Sammy boy! Where the hell you been?" He'd gotten the name, Santa Claus, in the days when he wore a white beard and his cheeks were chubbier than they were now. A lot of people thought he'd made his dough going down the chimney in Gimbel's window. But the truth is he was probably the most artistic beggar that ever hit Broadway. He'd retired years ago with a Cadillac and a son in Harvard but he still played newsie now and then just to keep in touch with things. There was damn' little he didn't know about what went on.

I stuck the cigar into the gap between his front teeth and said, "Let's go drill some foam."

He knew a place and, equipped with two Buds and some privacy, I asked, "Anything coming through on the Hayes rock?"

"You working it?"

I nodded.

"That's a funny deal, Sammy," he said. "There's a lot of people interested. Big people. But so far, not a rumble—anywhere."

"Any good ice men in town?"

"Johnny Barton's layin' up in the Bronx out he's been sick." He shook his head. "It don't look pro."

The beer was gone and it was getting late. I said, "Thanks for the dope. And give my best to the missus."

"I will, Sammy," he said, then added shyly, "I'm taking her to Colorado Springs for the summer."

I patted him on the shoulder. "Do you both good. Don't forget to send me some snow."

So far I didn't have a glimmer and heading for West 4th, I wondered if maybe I wasn't in the wrong racket. New York summers are hot. Maybe a tin cup and a sad spiel would be a good investment.

THE landlord called it an apartment. Actually it was just a room, a bath and a hot plate. Not very good but cheap. And the hot plate was handy for drying out shoes. I took a shower, shaved and tried on my old tux. It didn't look bad at all. I tucked in a display handkerchief and started out. At the door I had a second thought. I fished my .38/44 from under the shirts and climbed into the shoulder harness. I wasn't looking for trouble but new joints are apt to be tricky.

Club 17 was a walk-down, crummy at the steps but, inside, something that belonged in the Fifties. An orchestra, white linen, a quiet bar. Upholstered. After what Milo had told me, maybe a clip. But strictly class. In the Village where they sell either girls, jazz or just atmosphere it was an eye-popper.

I ordered a Bushmills with a water side and leaned back against the bar. As far as I could see there wasn't a mug in the house. When the bartender wiped down my way again I said,

"I hear a guy can try his luck here."

"There's a club in the rear, sir," he

She came back with iodine, bandages and two drinks. She knew what she was doing.

answered, very polite, "but you can't get in unless you're a member."

"Who do you see about being a member?"

"Mr. Cantrell, I guess."

"Where's he?"

"In the club."

I looked him over a little closer. Clean-cut. A kid. He wasn't being smart; he was just confused.

"Don't let it throw you," I said. "While you're fixing another I'll try to think of something."

But all I could think of was a third Bushmills and then a fourth. After that I figured I didn't really need an angle after all. I drifted back through the curtains at the rear and knocked at the door. The gorilla at the peephole was no kid.

"I'd like to see Mr. Cantrell," I said.

"You a member?"

I shook my head. "That's what I want to see him about."

"Mr. Cantrell ain't in," he snapped and I was looking at a blank door.

I knocked again. When he opened up I showed him a twenty. He just slammed the trap again. It's my face, I guess. I went back to the bar and Bushmills.

I'd about gotten to the point where I was ready to go scouting for a loose win-

dow when Oliver walked in. He was wearing a shawl-lapelled midnight blue that must have been cut by angels, and his crew-cut didn't look as bad with it as I would have thought. I snagged him as he went past the bar.

"Mr. Fale!" he smirked. "I can't believe it."

I couldn't see that one getting us anywhere. I said, "Where's the arm tonight?"

"I left him outside. He doesn't like night clubs."

"It's probably mutual. Drink?"

"No thanks. I'm going inside."

"Just the man I'm looking for then. Think you can get me in too?"

He was skeptical. "What is this—your night off?"

I nodded sadly. "I'm trying my best to lose our friend's retainer. Nobody seems to want it."

"Okay," he decided, "come on."

The gorilla was all smiles for Oliver but he froze when he spotted me.

"It's all right, Fred," Oliver said. "I know the gentleman." We went in.

Cantrell had a regular casino layout—roulette, blackjack, dice, poker, even Faro—and the big room had the same atmosphere as the nightclub. Rich. Subdued. Waiters padded back and forth with trays of drinks and the only sound above the hum of the players was the click of chips.

Oliver went straight to the main crap table and I tagged along. It was a $5-minimum-$500-limit game but it was too early yet for the big money players. Most of the action was for tens and twenties. While Oliver bought chips I gave the stick man a once-over.

I'D heard a lot about Gerard but this was the first time I'd ever seen him. He was tall and very thin with black hair that looked like it had been painted on his skull. I pegged him for a lunger although I didn't see him cough once the whole night. He stood there like a statue with his stickman's chant coming out of stiff lips, not moving anything but his eyes and hands. He was fast but so smooth you didn't notice it.

Oliver was betting the limit and seemed to be winning a little. I watched him a while then started wandering. I was looking for Cantrell but there didn't seem to be anybody around that might be him. Finally I asked one of the floorwalkers.

"Mr. Cantrell isn't in yet," he said. "Anything I could do?"

"Nope," I said and went back to the game.

Oliver wasn't doing so good. He gave me a wry grin over his shoulder.

"How much you down?"

"About six thousand."

That was laying it on a little thick, even for Gerard. I moved in closer. Watching the play, you couldn't see a thing; but I didn't have much trouble figuring out what he was doing. He was letting Oliver make a point then ripping burst-outs into the game. After that Oliver could throw till his arm fell off and never make a pass. As soon as he crapped out, Gerard switched the fair dice back.

I bought a century's worth of chips and began playing the back line whenever Oliver had the dice. In no time my stack was half a grand. I pulled and when the dice came around the table I threw them over to Gerard.

"Let's have a box-up," I said and put five hundred on the pass line.

He spilled new dice across the table and I reached into the thickest pile. I got one pair with my fingertips and palmed a second pair. When the table was clear again I threw. Ten.

Gerard hooked the dice with his rake picked them up and tossed them back to me. At least that's what it looked like he did. But I would have bet my shirt I now had a pair of miss-outs. I did a palm switch, threw out the fair dice and while they were still bouncing around, dropped the Tee's in my pocket.

I caught six on the roll. Gerard skidded them back. I shook and threw again, snapping 'em out hard. They came off the rubber spinning. One dropped dead

—a five. The other slowed, then flipped over beside the first one. Another five.

Gerard's eyes flicked over the top of my head and as I reached for the two stacks of chips, a voice behind me said,

"Telephone call, Mister."

"Thanks. I been expecting that." I shoved my chips in front of Oliver. "Nurse 'em along for me, will you?"

As soon as we were away from the table, the guide dropped his smile and nodded me toward a short flight of carpeted steps at the rear of the room. He was a big bruiser in a too-tight tux and his head was set flush with his bow tie. We headed for a door that looked like polished wood, but I got a feel of it as we went through. Cold and heavy. Armored steel.

"Here's the hustler, boss," No-Neck growled.

NICK CANTRELL was sitting behind a kidney-shaped desk of blond wood in a room that was a combination office and lounge. He had a long flexible steel file and he was touching up nails that, from where I stood, already looked perfect. He glanced up and said,

"Frisked?"

No-Neck jumped as though he'd been shot. He got the .38/44, patted me on the hips for good measure and took the gun over to the desk. Cantrell blew on his nails.

"Who's on the door?"

"Fred, I think, boss."

"Get him."

Cantrell put away his file and looked at me for the first time. He hadn't changed into evening clothes yet and the brown Shetland jacket, ivory shirt and Sulka four-in-hand would have made an Esquire man's mouth water. Quiet. Conservative. Except that he wore a collar pin so tight up under the knot the tie bowed out over his shirt. He looked at somebody behind me and said,

"Know him, Sarkis?"

The guy came around front. He was about my size, dark, with sideburns and a trick mustache, and he had a pinkish-purple blotch on his forehead that looked like a bruise but was probably a birthmark.

"Uh-uh," he said. "Never saw him before."

The door opened and Gerard came in.

"What happened?" Cantrell asked.

"I don't know, Mr. Cantrell. This guy had a big bet up. I threw him the bust-outs and he still made his point. He must've had some fair dice on him but I didn't see him switch 'em in."

"That makes us even," I said. "I didn't see you rip in the Tops." I took the dice out of my pocket and tossed them on the desk. "Here they are in case you're short."

Cantrell looked them over. "All right, Gerard. Go back to your table." He smiled at me. "You're quite a mechanic if you can fool Gerard."

"I had a mis-spent youth."

Sarkis made a hissing sound. "Oh, baby," he murmured. "A comic." He stepped in and slapped me twice, hard. If you know how to do it a slap can hurt like hell Sarkis knew how.

I grinned a little, ready for him this time but Cantrell shook his head and the Greek stepped back.

"If you're good enough to beat a pair of tops," Cantrell said, "you ought to be smart enough to know what would happen when you did."

"You know, you just had a helluva thought there," I said and tossed him my wallet.

"Samuel Fale, huh? A private eye."

"Now I know him," Sarkis grunted.

"Well, Mr. Fale?"

THERE was my cue and I suddenly realized I didn't have any lines to go with it. I was beginning to think maybe the hocus-pocus entrance hadn't been such a bright idea after all when the door opened again and No-Neck came in with Fred, the doorman. For the moment, Cantrell forgot about me.

"This man got in with a gun," he said to Fred. "How?"

"He came in with Mr. Oliver, boss. I didn't think to frisk him."

There was a sudden silence. "You want

Oliver, boss?" No-Neck asked eagerly.

"No. Never mind." Cantrell waved them out. "Well, Mr. Fale?"

"I went to a lot of trouble," I said, "to see you. Nobody else."

"Wait outside, Sarkis."

When the door closed, I said, "You got a bar. Let's have a drink."

For a minute I thought he was going to blow but he decided to smile instead. He was smooth all right and to a dame, I guess, good looking. Wavy hair, eyes with twinkle wrinkles, and a dimple on each side of his mouth. It was one of those faces a writer might call humorously sensitive or sensitively humorous. Either way I didn't like it.

"What'll you have?"

"Grenadine."

"Grenadine? With what?"

"Ice," I said. "Plenty of ice."

I saw his back get stiff and for the first time I began to relax. The whole play had been a shot in the dark but if Honey Hair had told me the truth there had to be a tie-in somewhere. It looked like I was getting close.

"No grenadine. Whiskey do?"

"Sure," I said. "Whiskey is fine."

He brought the drinks back and we both took a sip.

"I'm listening," he said. "What's on your mind?"

"Ice."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yeah," I said. "I guess that's the best way to play it." I took another sip.

"There's some property loose around town. I'm looking for it. It ain't been moved out yet and, being the sort of property it is, it ain't gonna be moved out without a lot of people knowing about it. I got this from the grapevine and what I can get the cops can get too. It looks like this property might be a bad investment for whoever's got it."

I gave him a quick eye but he wasn't having any.

"The smart thing to do when you can't move stuff out is to move it back in. That's my proposition. I'll handle the deal—at a fair price to all concerned and no questions asked."

Cantrell studied his drink. "Who are you working for, Fale?"

"Uh-uh," I said. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He stood up, flashing the dimples, but his Oxford accent was beginning to sag at the seams.

"I'll let you know if I hear anything."

"Fine," I said. "Now if you'll get my gun . . ."

He shook his head and worked the twinkle for me. "No. I think not."

"I'll be back," I said. "It better be here."

At the table Oliver was still the gentleman gambler losing his shirt. "Her husband finally leave?" he winked.

"Yeah. I got to go."

Gerard cashed in my chips without batting an eye and Fred opened the door as if he'd never seen me before. In fact nobody in the whole joint looked at me twice. But I still had goose pimples all over my back until I got into the hole on West 4th and locked the door.

CHAPTER III

Death Moves In

I ALWAYS sleep good when I'm working and I woke up, to coin a phrase, feeling like a new man. By nine I was leaning back in the swivel with a *News*, letting my stomach turn eggs, toast and two cups of coffee into vitamins for the day. There didn't seem to be anything new on the Kimberley Rose except the usual 24-hour arrest balony. I lit a Picayune and turned to the comics. At 9:30 the telephone rang.

"Fale Agency," I said. It was Honey Hair. "Naw," I said, putting some gravel in my voice, "Mr. Fale ain't in yet. Any message?" There wasn't any and I went back to the comics.

At ten she called again. "He still ain't in, sister," I growled. "Why don't you leave a number?" She was annoyed. I guess I was supposed to be there when she called.

Harry finally called at 10:25. "Shoot," I said. "I been waiting all morning."

He gave it to me—quick but complete. I said, "You sure about this?"

"If I ain't I sure wasted twenty bucks talking to Philly."

"I got the dough," I said. "Don't strain yourself. I want you to get on a guy named Vincent Oliver. He's in the book. Upper Fifth. No, I'll see you tonight at the Elite."

I disconnected and jiggled for the operator. She got the Ritz and finally Honey Hair came on.

"This is Fale," I said. "I'm coming over."

The Ritz-Plaza is on Park and it has just about more entrances than anything else, including rooms. You can even drive a car into it underground. But this was no emergency. I used the main door on the avenue.

I had on dark hornrims and a fedora and I carried a briefcase. I was trying to look like a young executive. The express elevator let me off all alone one floor below the penthouse level. I headed for the exit stairs. If you ever want to feel silly try sneaking up a flight of exit stairs like a young executive.

There was nobody in sight along the corridor and Honey Hair let me in after one knock. She was wearing a housecoat and her hair was pulled up on top of her head. She looked good enough to drink. When I noticed she was staring, I got rid of the glasses, fedora and briefcase.

"Disguise," I said.

She grinned and showed me the way in, which is not as dumb as it sounds. The Ritz' penthouse apartments are big and they have lots of rooms and they rent for about $2000 a month. You could hide a tribe of Indians in the nap on the rugs. She had the breakfast table set up in front of a wide glass window that overlooked the city.

"I'm just starting," she said. "Have some."

I poured myself a cup of coffee and sipped it while she worked on the eggs and bacon. She didn't toy with them; she ate. In a minute she glanced up.

She started to laugh and I slapped her four times.

"Any news yet?"

"Yeah," I said. "Tell me about Philly."

She put her fork down carefully, not looking at me, then she sat back and lit a cigarette.

"I'm glad you know," she said quietly. "It makes things easier. I would have told you myself except, well, I knew you'd think . . . what you think."

"You hook a guy sixty years old. He dies before you're married a year. A month later you're already unloading the loot. What would anybody think?"

She smoothed her napkin carefully. "I don't know why your opinion should matter to me," she said slowly. "But somehow it does." She looked me straight in the eyes.

"You're no boy scout, Sam. You know the world doesn't run like the storybooks say. Sure I hooked him. I've been on my own since I was fifteen, and for a girl that's no picnic. I hooked him but I didn't fool him."

I pushed the coffee cup away and got out a Picayune.

"Jake . . ." she said and her lips twisted a little, ". . . sure he called himself Jake—the J. Winston was my idea. Jake never even got to high school. He made his money in the contracting business. The hard way. And he didn't care who knew it. He wanted me and I wanted what he could give me. It was a bargain both of us understood and I don't think he ever regretted it. I know I didn't. Jake was one helluva man and I tried to be a good wife to him."

No tears, no choking voice. Just straight talk. "All right," I said. "We're slick."

"Not yet, Sam. You want to know about the money. He left me everything—jewelry, property, the business free. The money in trust, to be paid out $50,000 a year as long as I live." She waited a minute. "Okay?"

"I said we're slick."

She stood up. "I feel better. In fact, I feel fine. Let's have a drink."

New York ain't the tropics; I don't drink by the clock. I said, "Make mine with water."

WE had two—bourbon. The sun was hot against the big window and I took off my coat and loosened my tie. She pulled the Venetians. The room got rosy.

I said, "I got a lead, Mrs. Hayes. I might be able to buy back the Kimberly for you."

She was sitting on a sofa that looked about two blocks long. "It's Coral, Sam."

"Coral," I said and dipped into the third bourbon.

"Why should I pay for something that already belongs to me?"

"You won't have to pay. The insurance company'll be glad to handle it. Save them from taking the full loss."

She smiled at me through her eyelashes and patted the sofa. "Come here."

The sofa felt almost as deep as it was long. She took the cigarette out of my mouth and put it in hers.

"Anything you say, Sam, is all right with me." Smokey. Husky. She was close and her perfume was beginning to mix with the bourbon. I set my drink on the floor. "Anything . . ."

I reached for the cigarette and she caught my arm. She unbuttoned my shirt cuff and rolled back the sleeve. "Strong hairy wrists," she said. "I noticed that the first time I saw you. You're hard, Sam, and there's something violent in you. It scares me."

She had a funny look on her face and for a minute I had the crazy notion I could see the bones underneath. "Look," I said, "if we're gonna play *Spellbound* maybe I better go get my skiis."

Her eyes got dark. "Don't make fun of me, Sam. I'm lonely. I've got everything I ever thought I wanted. And I'm lonely."

It was like somebody pouring warm buttermilk down my ear. I don't know why but I tried once more.

"I had breakfast, baby. But it was nothing to stand up under the size drinks you make . . ."

She pulled my head down. Her mouth was soft and suddenly the housecoat was tight against my chest and I didn't care whether school kept or not.

"Later," she whispered, her lips barely moving against mine. "Later . . ."

I TOOK it easy getting back to the office. It was cooler and the flowers in Rockefeller Center had just been changed. By the time I got to Eighth the sun was barely hitting the tops of the buildings; the streets were getting hazy. I unlocked the office door and went in. I had a visitor.

He had pulled a chair around in front

of the desk so he could watch the door and he looked like he was half asleep. But that's the way he always looked. He was Joey Chill.

"Looks just ain't what they used to be," I said and went behind the desk.

He turned the chair around and looked me over. His face was very smooth and white, with pale eyes, and he had one of those high light voices that sound a little girlish.

He said, "I hear you're a real heavy boy. Personally, I can't see it."

He wrinkled his forehead when he talked and his eyes went wide, like he was a little puzzled. Only there was no expression there. No expression whatever.

"Personally," he said, "I don't think you're very heavy at all."

"Quit scaring me, Joey. My nerves ain't so good anymore." Joey was a killer; I knew he was nobody to kid around with. But I also knew that when he meant business he didn't waste time talking. "You wanta see me about something?"

He flicked his lips open in what was supposed to be a grin and pushed back his Panama. He was carrying one red and one yellow swizzle stick in the breast pocket of his coat, and he took out the yellow one and began to twirl it slowly along his fingers like a drum major handling a baton.

"That's a nice hunka wire you got stashed at the Ritz," he said. "Maybe you oughta settle down."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you're bowing your neck, heavy boy. You're rushing around too much. At your age it's bad on the heart."

"I had a hard day, Joey. You better cut that a little deeper."

He frowned at his hand and reversed the swizzle stick. "The rock, heavy boy, the rock. The word is—lay off."

"Okay," I said. "That's plain enough. Is there supposed to be an answer?"

"There's lots of answers," he said, getting up. "But only one of them's right. I'll see you around."

It was funny. After he'd gone I had a feeling he'd never even been there. But it was just a feeling. He'd left the yellow swizzle stick on my desk.

I didn't turn on the lights. I put my feet up and got out a Picayune. Joey was a free-lance and he came high, which was all right considering the dough involved. But unless I had the picture all wrong, he just didn't fit in. I chewed it over for fifteen minutes. It still didn't add up.

I keep a spare gun in the safe—a .32 automatic with harness to fit. I got it out, closed the office and went down to the Elite. Harry was in the back booth, trying to look bored, but he had a grin on underneath.

I signaled Milo for some milk and sat down. "Good digging?"

"Paydirt." He wagged his head. "The people you know."

Harry is a pretty sharp kid. I don't make enough to take him on steady but I give him a job whenever the traffic will stand it. I took out two twenties and a ten and passed them across the table.

"Shoot."

"Well, this Oliver comes from a long line of greenbacks, and he has a pedigree Man O' War can't beat over half a length. In fact the two might be related the way friend Vince likes the ponies. Anyhow, it seems he's not quite a chip off the old block . . ."

"Skip the family," I said. "I know all that."

Harry put on his jackpot look. "You know the apartment on Fifth is a snow drop?"

I took a shot of milk and tabasco. "Cocaine?"

"Cocaine, heroin, opium — anything you want. But strictly for the class trade. And you'd be surprised at some of the people . . ."

"Never mind," I waved him off. "I got over being surprised when I found out about the stork." I thought a minute. "Little Angelo in it?"

He nodded. "The supply man. But Oliver gets the dough, and the way he throws it around he needs plenty. Dice,

dames . . ." Harry ran out of words just thinking about it.

I saw Milo signaling from the bar. I said, "Okay, kid. You did a good job," and went across the room.

"Telephone," Milo said.

I picked up the receiver. "Fale speaking?"

"You know who this is?" a voice asked. I knew. The voice had an Oxford accent.

"Yeah."

"I'd like to talk to you. Tonight. Can you make it?"

"I can make it."

THAT was all. Things were moving. But I didn't know yet whether I liked it or not. I was wondering how Cantrell knew where I was; I was wondering a lot of things. But I didn't have to wonder long. Joey Chill was waiting out side.

"Hello, heavy boy," he said. "Going my way?"

"Which way is that?"

"Which way is that. . . . You're a panic, heavy boy." He snapped his lips apart in that quick way he had, "17?"

"Okay," I said.

He waved in a taxi and opened the door.

"Let it go," I said. "We'll take the next one."

"Sure." He cocked his head at me. "Don't be nervous. I'm just trying to take care of you. The way you rush around. See?"

I saw all right and I made sure the first cab just didn't go around the block. The one we got into was a different color. When it started up I said,

"Fun is fun, Joey, but I'm all laughed out. You got any ideas this is a ride, you better think 'em over again. Two to one says I'm faster than you."

He looked at me from the corners of his eyes and chuckled. "Maybe you ain't as light as I figured. Maybe you ain't, at that."

Neither of us said anything else until I got out in front of 17. He leaned through the window and patted me on the shoulder.

"See, heavy boy. Safe and sound. No ideas. No horseplay at all." He started chuckling again and I could still hear the sound of it, low and jerky, as the cab pulled away.

Fred passed me into the casino as soon as I knocked. Sarkis was standing at the top of the steps.

"Cantrell around?"

"He's expecting you," he said. "Go on in."

I pushed through the steel door and closed it behind me. Nobody was in the office but there was another door across the room, half-opened. I went over.

Cantrell had a bedroom behind his office, big, with enough stuff in it to furnish a house, and air-conditioned to take care of the lack of windows. In one wall he had a small safe. Open. Ordinarily that might have worried him. It wouldn't now. For Cantrell was lying just under the safe with a hole the size of a dollar in his chest, and he was very dead.

I didn't have to examine him to know that. I could see the gun that had done the job. It was my .38/44 and it was on the rug beside him.

I went back to the office door in a hurry but there was no way to lock it that I could see. And I didn't have time to look for any electrical gadgets. I just had to hope Sarkis wouldn't take a notion to come in.

Back in the bedroom I noticed the smell of cordite was heavy in the air and blood was still coming out of the hole in Cantrell's chest. All of a sudden my neck got prickly. I hadn't missed the killer by more than a minute and there was a chance he was still there. I covered the place fast but I didn't miss any bets. I was all alone.

The safe wasn't messed up any and in a jeweler's box at the rear I found the Kimberley Rose. Dark as a ruby but fiery. It showered sparks wherever the light hit it.

I put it in my pocket, then took it out. There was a chance I could walk through the door and get out of the club before they found Cantrell. There was a better

chance that I couldn't. I went into the bathroom.

There was a box of waterproof Band Aids in the medicine cabinet. I picked out the biggest one, stripped off the gauze and stuck the diamond in the center of the tape. Then I took the lid off the back of the toilet, dried the metal float and taped the diamond on the bottom of it. I was sliding the lid back on when I heard the noise behind me.

A bare whisper of sound that stirred the air. I started around but I never made it. Something bright exploded and the cold white tiles came up and hit me and everything tilted over and I slid off the floor into darkness.

CHAPTER IV

Nice Framing

THE dice were red and white, as big as toy blocks, and they tumbled into my face from the darkness. Ice and fire together, Stinging. And far away I could hear a rhythmical splat of sound. I opened my eyes.

I was in Cantrell's office and then the ice hit me in the face again and I couldn't see. I shook my head and clawed at the whiteness. No-Neck stepped back. He had a wet towel in his hand. I must have been sleeping pretty hard.

Sarkis was sitting behind Cantrell's desk with his chin hanging on one fist and his eyes half closed, watching me. Fred was there and a couple of boys I hadn't seen before. Nobody was laughing.

"That was a dumb play, shamus," Sarkis said. "I thought you were supposed to be bright."

"I checked my brains outside tonight, all right."

He put his chin on the other fist. "You always fall down on a job like that?"

"All the time. Especially when somebody hits me with a sap."

His eyes opened a little and for a minute I thought he looked puzzled. Then he grinned and shook his head.

"Lemme have him, boss," No-Neck pleaded.

I turned around in the chair and looked them over. Hard eyes, chins and guns under the black coats. But the feel wasn't quite right, and all of a sudden I had a hunch none of them were in on it but Sarkis.

"Look, boys," I said, "if you want Sarkis instead of Cantrell it's okay with me. You don't have to get so fancy. I don't give a damn."

No-Neck grinned around the room. "Hear the peeper, boys? He don't give a damn."

"Who hired it, Fale?" Sarkis snapped.

I didn't waste time with him; my only chance was the others. "You all saw me come in. Anybody hear any shooting afterwards?"

They just looked at me. Sarkis said, "Nobody heard any shooting. Nobody heard anything. The joint's soundproof." His voice got silky. "I asked you who hired the burn-out."

He waited while I sat there swallowing and holding my stomach muscles tight. My head ached; I felt sick. And there was no answer anyway. He had me all wrapped up.

"This is your last call, shamus."

Maybe I was scared but at least I wouldn't crawl. I said, "Aw, go to hell."

He brushed the little mustache, makling up his mind. Then he punched a button and leaned over the desk box. "Jackie, get out the big car. Yeah. Bring it around to the side."

I could try for No-Neck. I could get around the chair and grab his gun while they were all cracking jokes and not noticing anything. I could in a pig's eye. But it was a better shake than I'd have later in the car. I was sliding my feet under me when the buzzer sounded.

Sarkis came out of his chair as though he had a wire on his shoulders. The others froze. Behind me, No-Neck blew words against my head.

"Cops! Whadda we do?"

Sarkis recovered first. He sat down. "Take it easy boys. We're in the clear. I'll do the talking."

We didn't have long to wait. The door slammed open and Maddux and two

other cops came in. It would have to be Maddux.

He glared around the room. "What the hell's going on here!"

Sarkis was ready for him. "It's all right, Sergeant. We got the killer for you."

Maddux got red around the jowls. He took out his gun. "What's all this killer stuff?"

Sarkis told him.

"Why didn't you say so over the phone?" Maddux was still off balance and I had to hand it to Sarkis. He thought fast.

"I'm sorry, Sergeant. In the excitement my man must've forgot. This has been a shock to all of us."

Even Maddux wasn't that dumb. He snorted through his nose. "Stay put," he said and went into the bedroom. In a few seconds he was back.

"Call homicide," he ordered and while one cop used the phone the other cleaned out the guns in the crowd. Maddux came over to me.

"Well, wise guy. I knew you'd slip up one of these days."

"Believe it or not, Maddux," I said. "For once I'm glad to see you."

He hadn't been on homicide for nearly a year but he still liked to play with it. He made Sarkis go over the whole thing again, ignoring me except for a glance now and then. I didn't mind; I was waiting for Bernstein. But when the squad arrived fifteen minutes later, a sergeant I didn't know was in charge.

He listened to Maddux. He wasn't impressed. "The hell with it. Book the whole crew. I'll talk to 'em later."

HEADQUARTERS is a big place, and there are lots of rooms you don't see if you're just visiting. I had one all to myself—with Maddux and a stenographer. He grinned at me around a dead cigar and cracked his knuckles.

"Baby," he said, "this is gonna be a pleasure."

I said, "Don't be dumber than you have to, Maddux. Can't you spot a frame when it kicks you in the teeth?"

He threw the cigar away and cracked his knuckles again. "Fifteen years and you still singing the same old tune. Can't you punks ever thinka nothing different?"

I squeezed the arms of the chair. I thought about what movies were playing and which ones might be good, and in a minute the feeling passed. Maddux knew he could get me like that and he got a kick outa seeing me hold the stopper in.

He said, "You ready to talk?"

"Whaddaya think I been doing?"

He shook his head. "We get 'em like that too. Talk your ear off you give 'em half a chance. You know what I want."

I said two words, very distinctly. He sighed and glanced at the stenographer. "I'll tell you when to start taking it."

He took out his sap and wrapped a folded handkerchief around it. He tapped me, not hard, but exactly on the spot I'd been sapped before and while I was squinting against the sparks he got a handful of hair and jerked my head back. He turned on the light.

Maybe you don't know about the light. Maybe you think they use a bridge lamp. They don't. It's about two thousand candlepower with a shiny reflector, and three seconds after they turn it on you're blind as a bat. I closed my eyes, tight. Glass eyelids. The light came on through, all the way through until it was burning against the back of my skull and my head was full of smoke.

There was no sound in the room while I sat there with my nerves jerking, waiting for the sap. Five minutes, maybe ten. Then I was wishing for the sap; I was wishing for anything that might change the orange fire in my head.

"Like it, baby?" Maddux's voice was close to my ear. "Ain't this cozy? Just me and you, and you ain't tied down, you know. Anytime you feel like it you can get up and come after me. Anytime at all." He laughed. "And when you do, baby, that's when the picnic starts because then I won't haveta worry none about marking you up."

He let me have the sap again. I barely

felt it. My head was all blown up and the sap was no more than punching a balloon with your finger. But he didn't know that. He kept using it—little taps when he thought I wasn't expecting them and I flinched every time he hit me so he wouldn't catch on.

Once I heard water running. I almost came out of the chair then. But he was just getting a drink. He turned it off and went back to the sap. With my brains frying and my throat full of pins the sap was a laugh.

How long it took, I don't know, but all of a sudden I couldn't tell whether my eyes were open or shut. I tried moving them. Nothing happened. There was no feeling in my face and the lights didn't change. I got panicky then. I was blind, really blind. For keeps. And Maddux must have read my expression.

"Ready to sing, baby?"

I was ready. I would have confessed to killing my own mother then if it would've done any good. But I knew Maddux. He liked this sort of stuff. He would keep on till he got tired.

I SHOOK my head and got a new grip on the chair arms. Maddux went into his routine. There had to be some blackness somewhere and I was trying to look for it when the room got cooler and I heard a door open. A voice said, very low:

"All right, Maddux. Get out."

The hand in my hair let go. "Sure lootenant. Just trying to save you some work."

"Get out."

I followed their footsteps across the room. The door closed. I let my head drop forward and I put my hands over my eyes. Bernstein.

He said, "I'm sorry as hell, Sam." He held my head and gave me a cup of water. He laid something wet across my eyes.

I said, "For God's sake, turn the light off!"

"It's off, Sam. It takes a little time."

Maybe it was off. But not for me, I still had it, blind white, inside. I put my head back and cursed Maddux steadily.

Marty said, "You know how it is, Sam. You can find 'em anywhere. There's nothing I can do. Maddux knows some people."

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah . . ."

The light inside was going out. I could see a little—fuzzy, gray. I had the granddaddy of all headaches, but I wasn't blind. I sat up. "You on it now, Marty?"

"I'm on it. What happened?"

I told him from phone call to sap, leaving out the diamond. "The way I see it, Sarkis was just waiting for the right spot to put Cantrell down. When he heard the call he decided I'd make a good fall guy."

Bernstein's head was a dark egg with a hat. The hat moved, sideways. "It don't read that way, Sam."

He leaned over and put a cigarette in my mouth. "I finally straightened out the tip-off. An insurance dick made the call. He's on the Hayes robbery—a plant in the casino. He saw Cantrell go into the office alone. Nobody else went in until you arrived. When Sarkis went in, came out and called the boys, the dick had a hunch and ducked for a phone."

I took two drags on the cigarette and let the smoke out slow. "You know this dick, Marty?"

The hat dipped. "He's okay."

"That makes it pretty tight then."

"Damned tight."

I could see details now and Marty's face looked the same as ever—like something was worrying hell out of him and he'd been sucking a lemon trying to forget it. He was a copper from hat to shoes but he was smart and an okay guy.

I said, "They took the Smith & Wesson away from me last night."

"Any witnesses?"

"Plenty, but they all belong to Sarkis."

He shrugged.

I had another idea. "You don't carry a .38-44 in an automatic harness."

"I caught that," he said, "but it won't stand up. The D. A.'ll tell it like this: You go in with a .32, throw down on Cantrell, get the big gun, force him to open the safe, then blast him. And with

that angle maybe Sarkis' boys will talk after all."

"That's the D. A. How do you see it, Marty?"

"I don't know. It looks phony. I can't see you figuring to get away with a caper like that. And I know you ain't temperamental enough to let Cantrell needle you into gunplay." He shrugged. "But I just don't know."

"It's a frame, Marty. I gotta get out of here. Can you fix it?"

"I think so. I'll see Judge Thompson in the morning. The bail'll be high."

"Give me two minutes at a private phone, I'll get it."

His voice got off-hand. "You wouldn't want to tell me what you and Cantrell was gonna talk about?"

"Not yet. As soon as I can but not yet."

He got up and held the door open for me. "If you did it, Sam," he said, "I'll burn you as fast as the next guy."

I grinned, but I knew he wasn't kidding. Nobody was kidding on this job. I only hoped Honey Hair would come through with the bail.

MORNING comes chilly in the Tombs. Even in summer. And you wake up with the taste of steel and disinfectant in your mouth. I swung my legs over the side of the bunk and felt the lump on my head. It was tender and as soft as an old tomato. My eyes felt like they'd been worked over with a cheese grater. But Bernstein was there and he had the spring all rigged. He let me use his office phone.

Eight-thirty is a little early for the Ritz. Honey Hair's voice was full of blankets and silk pillows. I said,

"This is Sam, baby. Seen the morning papers?"

"Quit kidding. It won't be morning for hours yet. Go back to sleep."

"I'm in the can," I snapped. "If you want the rock you better get down here fast with a checkbook."

That did it. I could hear her sitting up. "Where are you, Sam?" I told her. "All right," she said. "I'll be there."

She must've had wings or a siren; she made it in less than an hour. They verified her check, gave me my stuff at the desk and I was a free man. On the way out I got Bernstein in a corner. He didn't much like the idea but he promised to keep her out of it if he could. In the convertible outside, she said,

"That must have been some party last night. Who threw it?"

"I don't know. I got in on it by mistake."

She flicked the green eyes. "I'm a big girl, Sam."

"It'll all be in the papers, honey. Cross over to Broadway."

I got out at Bleecker. "I'm gonna be busy," I said. "I'll call you when I can."

She leaned across the seat. "No kiss this morning?"

Stretched through a car window, it wasn't quite enough and at the same time it was almost too much. I pulled back.

"You need a shave," she said and then, softer: "Take care of yourself."

"Just for the record," I said, "what did you do last night?"

"Vincent took me out. Why?" For a second she was startled. Then she laughed. "Jealous?"

"Sure," I said, "but I'll try not to show it."

After the Packard turned the corner I walked west along Bleecker until I found a drug store. I ordered breakfast and tried my best to make it last. But I couldn't wait forever. I got into a booth and called 17. Sarkis answered.

"This is Fale," I said. "I'm ready for my gun."

He was a little surprised. He said, "The cops took it."

"Not that one. The .32."

"Listen," he said, "if you think you can get away with anything around here . . ."

"I can get away with the gun. Or do you want the cops back?"

The line was dead for a minute. Finally he said, "Yeah, I guess you can. Okay."

He met me at the door with a .38 Colt. He went over me carefully before he put it away and stepped back.

"Nervous out today, ain't it?"

"After you," he said.

We went on through the casino into the office. I looked around. The pictures were different and the furniture had been ranged around some. I said,

"Moved in already, huh?"

"Here," he said. "Not there," and jerked his head at the bedroom. "I'm superstitious."

I stuck out my hand. "The gun."

HE took it out of the desk, checked to see that the clip was empty, handed it to me and grinned. That made it perfect. I hit him once just under the chin and his teeth made a sound like Nelson playing a three iron. He fell straight back into the chair, teetered, then dropped off to the floor.

I was into the bathroom working at the lid on the john almost before he quit quivering. I lifted the float carefully. The diamond was gone. I tried the safe. It was open but empty. I went back into the office.

Sarkis was clean and I got his keys and went through the desk. Nothing. Nothing anywhere. I was just finishing when he groaned and tried to sit up. I swung the .32 easy and I placed it just right. Tomorrow he would have a matching birthmark over his right eye.

Going out I tried not to slam any doors. I'm thoughtful that way.

I walked back to the apartment, thinking maybe a little fresh carbon monoxide would kill what was left of the headache. But it didn't; it only gave me a sore throat to boot. So I opened my last bottle of Bushmill's and took three fingers, straight, and got under a hot shower. When I was sweating good I switched to cold and let it run for five minutes. I used a rough towel and a razor. I felt better.

Cigarettes and whisky were handy on the night table. I pulled down the shade and stretched out on the bed.

The frame was a beaut. Nobody knew that better than me. Because I was there —from hook to snapper—and I not only didn't have any idea who was behind it, I couldn't even figure out how it had been done.

I'd been suckered once before, a long time ago, and I never forgot it. Even now, thinking about it could make me a little crazy. But that frame had been small stuff. This one handed me a ticket for the long haul. Murder.

I closed my eyes, trying to concentrate, and I must have dozed off. When I opened them again the sun looked different on the shade and I had the feeling I'd been dreaming. Dreaming something important.

I tried to sleep again and couldn't. And then I knew it wasn't a dream at all. It was something I remembered. Something in the bathroom, just before the sap put me down. It was there in my mind but I couldn't get hold of it.

I took a sip of Irish and lit a cigarette. Those things either come to you or they don't. You can't force 'em. This one came and I remembered what it was there in the bathroom and I knew who had handled the sap. I knew. But it didn't make any sense. Then, suddenly, without any facts to back me up, I saw how it *might* make sense.

My watch said 3:30. I got dressed fast and I ran down the stairs and I caught a cab pulling away from the corner grocery.

"The Court House, buddy. I'll pay the fines."

He was a good driver; we only had to bust two lights. I gave him a five and I gave the clerk a five and I had the records all to myself. It took me an hour and a half to find what I was looking for.

I don't remember leaving the building. It was as though I'd spent the day in a icebox. My hands were numb and I felt cold behind the eyes, and I might have done something foolish if I hadn't suddenly woke up to the fact there was a shadow on me.

He was good; I couldn't spot him. But I didn't have to. When you've been in the business as long as I have you get a feeling for those things. I stuck with the crowds, moving fast. He had seen me go

in for the records and I knew from now on the gloves would be off.

I worked north and west, looking for a free cab, and finally caught one at Lafayette and Canal. I gave the driver my office address and shoved a ten over his shoulder.

"I got a tail, Jack. See what you can do, but don't go outa your way." I didn't care whether I shook the guy or not; I just didn't want to get caught in a cab.

The cabby looked at me in the mirror and nodded. He went straight and fast until we hit the garment district, then he tried some one-way streets. The wrong way. It's about as good as anything when you know the midtown traffic is gonna be heavy, and we were lucky. Nobody got close. When he let me out on Eighth it was getting dark.

I went up by the stairs, scouting the hallway before I stepped clear, and I didn't waste time getting into the office. I locked the hall door behind me. I didn't turn on any lights. I loaded the .32 and dropped it on the blotter. I found my big flash and laid it beside the gun. Then I sat down in the swivel and put my feet up.

It was quiet. All around me the city was slipping into gear for the night—bathed and shaved and every light lit. Ready to eat, ready to drink. Ready. While I sat in a dark little room three stories in the air with nothing to do but watch a cheap hotel sign stamp shiny red squares on the toes of my shoes.

A bus passed below, spreading its purr between the buildings. Somebody whistled for a taxi. The window panes fluttered. Then I heard what I'd been waiting for—the sound of a key turning very carefully in the lock on the hall door.

I TOOK my feet down. I picked up the flash and the gun. I could see the hall door, directly opposite my desk through the waiting room, but nothing showed against the glass. He'd turned out the light.

I moved back into a corner, and for a while there was nothing but a dull buzz from the street below. Then I heard the door squeak. It never squeaked except at one point—when it was all the way open. He was inside.

I had my eyes glued on the dim rectangle of the doorway and I crouched a little, trying to spot him by ear. But he was an old hand. He took his time and he didn't bump into anything. There was no sound, anywhere, and suddenly the window panes fluttered again, loud in the silence, and I almost pulled the trigger before I could stop myself. I was getting cramped; my muscles felt like pieces of stretched wood. I shifted my weight carefully, trying to relax.

Then I saw it—a darker line against the edge of the wood and it spread out slowly, filling the doorway. I blinked my eyes, wanting to make sure it was real, and, as I did, the hotel sign flashed. He was there, crouching, rusty in the indirect glow. Then the sign went out.

I pressed the flash button and I snapped, "Freeze, baby!"

He jerked aside, his face a white blur through the cone of light, and two red gouts of flame jumped out at me and the room shook with sound. I hit the floor rolling hard and I slammed into the bottom of the desk and I lay there, with my heart banging the floor boards, listening.

I could hear him across the room, breathing heavy through his nose and muttering to himself. There was a scraping sound and he cut loose the cannon again. He was using a big gun. The slugs came all the way through the length of the desk, dropping wood splinters on my neck.

"Take it, peeper. Come out and take it." He said it low, almost like he was talking to himself.

I turned on my side and heaved the flash into the opposite wall. I heard him scramble around and the gun started roaring. I stood up then and placed four shots in a line across his gunflash. He grunted. The shooting stopped. He groaned.

Crouching, I moved away from the

desk. He started laughing, a steady mechanical laugh that brought the hairs up on the back of my neck. I wished then for my .38-44. A .32 don't have much stopping power.

"I'm coming, peeper. I'm coming over."

The scraping sound again. Steady, getting closer. He was coming all right and I couldn't see a thing. The room was full of smoke and every few seconds the sign across the street turned into a red fog. Red, then gray; red, gray. From ceiling to the shadow line cast by the bottom of the windows. Below that, black.

I crouched there, listening to him coming and watching the shadow line, and my throat was full of cotton. He'd shot nine times already so he either had spare clips or an extra gun. I had four bullets left.

"I see you, peeper." Before I could move, flame lanced out over the top of the desk and I heard the bullet crack past my ear. I grunted and pitched over sideways and I didn't move.

He started laughing again, coughing a little, and gradually the silhouette came above the shadow line. Visible, invisible, laughing. I couldn't take a chance. So I lay there with my skin crawling, waiting. He was close—a black mass above me with metal gleaming and I caught the shine of his eyes. I squeezed the trigger.

For a minute nothing happened and I thought I'd missed. Then the red fog swirled and he came crashing down to the floor.

I scrambled away quick and got the flash. I speared him with it and jumped aside. Nothing happened. I tried it again and got his gun hand in the circle of light. I held it there and clicked the wall switch with my elbow. He didn't move.

I went across the room cautiously and turned him over. His eyes were still open. Pinpoints. I let him drop back. He was coked to the ears, with three slugs in the chest and one in the head, but he wasn't the guy I'd expected. He was Little Angelo.

CHAPTER V

"The Lady Has a Past"

I OPENED the windows and sat down at the desk. I was breathing hard and my hands were shaking and my ears were still ringing from the guns. I got a cup of water from the cooler. I had a cigarette. By the time my nerves quit jumping and my brain started working I realized I didn't know so damn much about the case after all.

I got another cup of water and I looked at it for a while and I poured it out. I called Honey Hair. She was in.

"Sam, baby. You alone? Okay, listen close. Things are bustin' wide open. I want you to lock all your doors and stay there. Don't answer the phone and don't open up for anybody but me. Got it? I'll be over in about an hour."

I hung up and called Sarkis. I'm not too good at imitating voices, but I didn't figure it would have to be too good tonight."

"This is Oliver," I said. "Fale's been poking around again. I'm worried."

Sarkis sounded impatient. "Forget Fale. We're in the clear. He's only bluffing."

"No he's not. He knows all about it."

"I don't give a damn what he knows. He can't prove anything. Just sit tight."

"But you told me you had us covered," I said, putting a little whine into it. "I can't afford to get mixed up with . . ."

"Listen, you lousy teanound, you're already in it and if you crack on me tonight, you'll be wearing a concrete overcoat tomorrow Shut up and go to bed. I'll see you in the morning." Sarkis slammed down his receiver.

I waited a minute and dialed Oliver's number. I was better as Sarkis. "That was a sucker play you pulled tonight, Oliver."

He was confused. "Sarkis?" and when I grunted, he said, "What do you mean?"

"I mean putting Little Angelo onto Fale. Listen, you lousy teahound, we were in the clear but you damn sure screwed up the works now."

(Continued on page 115)

DEATH SHAPES

Matt Tudor thought he was only planting evidence for a divorce case but fate took a bloody hand in the proceedings and he found he had a slaughtered brunette in the set-up instead of the familiar "unknown blonde". Here was a nice kettle of fish!

The banker dropped the gat and Laura, like a bright girl, pounced on it.

THE suite that Gerald Henstowe had established residence in for the last few days was on the eleventh floor of the Century House. I crept stealthily down the hotel corridor and applied my eye to a keyhole. All I saw was a keyhole-shaped blot. The key was in the lock.

Fine thing! Matt Tudor, who had police and military heroes in his family, now a bush-league detective gumshoeing blondes through boudoir doors. This

THE FRAME

By JOSEPH COMMINGS

Illustrated by
William Meilink

should happen to a guy who thinks he knows murder from *A* to *Why*.

I straightened up and faced the two men standing behind me. The prairie-dog-faced one was swinging a Graflex. "All set?" I whispered. They nodded. "We've given them ten minutes. Enough time to get ready."

The door was locked. I knew it would be. I produced my oustiti. No self-respecting private nose should be without one. It's a pliers-shaped instrument having very thin tongs somewhat rounded and rifled on the inside to prevent slipping. I inserted it in the lock, nipped the key, and turned it. I opened the door and we went in Indian-file, with me in

the lead.

I immediately stumbled over a freshly-killed champagne bottle. Veuve Clicquot, 1918. I stopped short and the two men behind me rammed into what I like to think is my chesty, box-shouldered physique.

A bottle of Scotch, at half-mast, was by the leg of an engulfing easy chair. Wallowing in the deeps of the chair was a minnow-sized young man with coppery hair as curly as a poodle's.

I stepped forward and bent over my client, Gerald Henstowe. He was dead—drunk.

Gerald could make one of Ray Milland's weekends look like a tea party. I looked around the room in surprise. This wasn't operating according to plan. Somebody was missing. Where was Laura? Motioning the lensman to keep his flashbulb up, I strode to the closed bedroom door.

My hand on the knob, I stopped, hesitating because this was the part I hated. There'd be a lot of Laura Griffith behind the door. Nobody can make a decent living any more.

Shuddering off the nasty feeling, I pushed the door open. The bedroom was done in a cream shade and it had Norwegian hand-crocheted bedspreads. Did I say that the rates in this hotel were as high as a jag? The nighttable lamp was lit between the twin beds. A woman dressed for the opera law sprawled face-down on one of them.

The sight of the black velvet evening gown made me feel grouchy. I said, "What's the matter? What've you got that on for?"

She didn't speak, didn't move. Gripping one of her limp shoulders in my thick-fingered paw that can cope single-handedly with a Dagwood sandwich, I spilled her over on her back. I could feel the blood leaving my face under the barbershop tan. The gown was cut low. Wet blood was smeared on her pale smooth skin. A small round hole was in her left breast. It had gone deep.

She had been stabbed—murdered. But it wasn't Laura Griffith. It vas Julia Henstowe. Gerald's wife!

I should have known. The hair was chestnut, not blonde like Laura's. I must have whistled, because when I became conscious of the way I'd automatically arranged the muscles of my face, my lips were all pursed up. I let my face relax and I frisked the body with my eyes. I reached out and touched her left hand. It was warm. There was an indentation around the middle finger of the left hand as if she had recently worn a ring there. But I didn't see any ring.

The two witnesses were standing in the bedroom door, ogling the dead woman. I pulled my congealed spine erect and looked around for a phone.

The two witnesses backed up as I advanced. I found the phone in the room where Gerald was snoring sottishly. As I dialed, the two witnesses started to weigh anchor with a right good will. I cut them off, throwing my leg across the doorway and bracing myself against the frame. I snapped at them, "You stay put!"

Gulping, they nodded and backed into a neutral corner.

I got the police and gave them an invitation to a cold meat party.

HOW was I going to explain this katzenjammer? I was hired by Gerald Henstowe. You must have heard of Gerald. He was the sweet music maestrow whose name band was starring at the chichi Starlit Terrace. Gerald was married but maiden-happy. Or maybe I should turn that around and say that he was maiden-happy but married. There's a distinction between th two, as I found out when he came to see me.

Gerald told me that the stand-by tuba-player with his band had recommended me as a competent operator who was as muscular as dog-meat and who never kicked back at a client. The tuba-player and I had frittered away a couple of dozen years at City College, so it was natural that I got the recommend when Gerald brought up the subject of the

split with his wife Julia.

With a very long, sad face Gerald told me that he was reluctantly giving his wife this divorce. Not that he wanted it. He could hardly bear to think of parting from gentle Julia. I supposed that she was his philandering insurance. She came through to save Gerald's hide from rapacious females after he'd indulged in extra-marital cheek-pinches. Gerald's nature was the oh-you-kid-but-I-don't-leave-my-wife brand. Now Julia was fed up. She wanted to call it quits. With a heavy heart Gerald was obliging.

It was to be the usual procedure. Gerald was going to live away from home a few days and take the suite at the Century House, the same hotel that boasted of Gerald's playground, the Starlit Terrace. Then at the proper time I was to send a girl up to his rooms and a few minutes later I, plus some camera-carrying witnesses, would break in and get photographic evidence of infidelity.

But I didn't know where I was going to get the girl.

Laura Griffith—the little girl who wasn't there—solved that problem for me. She'd come in to my Houston Street desk space by mistake, thinking she was following up a model agency ad. One glance told her how wrong she was. She wrinkled up her nose as if somebody'd swung a smudge-pot under it. She was a little taller than average, with a blond upsweep hairdo and a figure that makes a sweater happy.

I smirked at her and made my proposition. She said she didn't like it. She definitely didn't like messing in other people's divorces. But she added ruefully, "My finances are getting most unbearably low." What she meant was that she had one dime left and that was wearing so thin you could see Miss Liberty on both sides.

Unhappily she let me hire her. "What do I get in return for my services?"

"The Henstowes are very affluent," I said. "Old Papa Henstowe might see fit to give you a bonus. To show you how generous I can be, Miss Griffith, I'll let you keep fifty percent of everything you make."

All she did was sigh.

I decided we should plunge into this rat-race and carry it off tonight. I drew up a time schedule and synchronized our watches so that all the participants would be in the right places at the right time. After seeing Laura out, I briefed Gerald by phone. I told him we were all set to go. I had the girl and she would be at the Century House at eight p.m. sharp. Gerald was to remain in his rooms all evening before she showed up. She would enter the hotel through the lobby. I would come in through the service entrance with two witnesses. One of them would have the camera. We would wait ten minutes to give Laura time to disrobe artistically, then we'd crash in.

Gerald's voice sounded sluggish on the phone. He said it was okay with him. Any way I wanted to play it. He said that he'd had another talk with Julia, trying to dissuade her, steer her away from the divorce. "Her mind's made up solid," he said to me. "We'll have to go through with it, Tudor."

And that's the crop.

AFTER calling the police I put down the phone and went over to the pifflicated playboy in the armchair. With one hand I started to slap his pasty cheeks to bring him out of the stupor. One cheek got my palm, then on the return slap, his other cheek got the back of my hand. I lathered him up that way, putting plenty of sting into it.

All Gerald did was groan, blink open eyes like wilted cornflowers, and make puny efforts to block my stinging slaps.

I felt discouraged. My energy was going to waste. I looked at the two stiff, staring men. I said, "She was stabbed with a long, narrow, round-bladed knife. Help me look for it." I was thinking that it would be a wonderful thing for me if I could get the murder solved before the brawn of the police force arrived. *Local tin-star makes good. Tudor, the snout, presents solution to baffling murder to*

amazed police as they arrive. What publicity!

I stood where I was, watching the two men shuffle meekly from one place to the next. They had plenty of lead. The room wasn't over-furnished. Usual hotel stuff. And then there were the extras, like the bottles, some drinking-glasses, a few newspapers, and the vacuum cleaner in the corner.

I felt blue. I didn't find the knife before the police arrived.

We were still searching for it when the Homicide Squad trod in. To me, they looked like a platoon of the gashouse gang. Only this gang had auger-bits where eyes should be. They escorted a swaggering bimbo in an iron hat. He had a shape like a sweet potato, ears like oyster-shells and was uproariously known at Homicide as Inspector Mike Fink.

This scorpion had it in for me.

When Fink saw me he drew up short. The gang stopped one pace behind.

Fink said at me, "Oh ho! So it's you, Tudor!" He knew me well. I used to pester him around the police academy, giving him hot-foots. "Still trying to play Pinkerton!" He showed his yellow snaggle teeth in a vile, contemptuous grin. Grinning, this monster was enough to raise goose-pimples on a pool-cue.

I shoved my fists into my pants pockets. The grin I handed back to him was just as dirty. "How's your stomach for murder? Care to take a gander?" I led him into the bedroom.

Fink focussed his peepers on Julia's body. "Who's she?" he asked.

I thumbed over my shoulder at Gerald. "The lush's wife."

"And who's he?" Fink labored on.

"Gerald Henstowe, the ork leader."

"What're you doing here?"

I told him about our plans for unsealing the Henstowe marriage.

Fink growled at me with biting irony, "Is this the way you're divorcing them now? The quick, sure method, eh?" His men were loafing around flat-footed. "What're you gaping at me for?" he yelled at them. "Get a move on, you apes!"

This was scientific detection in high gear.

They started bustling around, bumping noses, making a great show of doing something. I don't know. Maybe they weren't as bad as I picture them. Maybe I talk like that because I have a crush on myself. You should see my hand-painted ties. Lush batik prints. And the pink shorts.

Fink was saying something to me. "How long's that squirt been living here?"

"A couple of days—to make it look natural."

Fink said, "It couldn't look more natural if it was embalmed." He went on talking under his breath. I left him looking for clues in the bedroom.

THE two witnesses I'd brought gave statements to the police, then were permitted to leave. I went to work on Gerald some more, slapping him palm and backhand. Finally I got him roused up enough to stand.

Gerald feebly protested another stinging blow, this time with words. "Hey, cut that out!"

"Ready to talk?" I said. "Did you kill her?"

Gerald blinked his puffed eyes and opened his blue lips. "Kill? Who?" His curly head swam from side to side.

"Your wife!"

"Is my wife—?"

I held him up with my right hand and pointed to the bedroom with my left. The police were drinking all this in. "Did you know your wife was in there instead of Laura Griffith?"

He shook his head dizzily. "My wife?"

"How long've you been in this room?"

"Since six . . . got some drinks . . . waiting for your girl . . . must've passed out . . ."

"I'll say you did. Do you remember any woman coming in?"

He shook his head. He wasn't feeling any pain.

"Do you remember *anybody* coming

in the room at all?" I asked.

Another head-shake.

I sheered away from him, feeling disgusted. I left him standing alone, swaying. I watched him to see which way he was going to fall.

Then the bluecoat stationed at the suite door was bowled aside and a stranger zoomed in like a cannonball. I'd never seen this newcomer before, but Gerald must have, because he belched, "Tom Reinecke!"

But they didn't act like two old school chums at a frat reunion. I got a fast-motion glimpse of chunky shoulders weaving for the kill and eyes blazing under bushy brows.

"Steal my wife, will you!" thundered Reinecke. That told me all I wanted to know about Reinecke.

Gerald was standing there as if he were starched. Not a cop was within reach of either of them as Reinecke uncorked a right for Gerald's quivering chops. The right started at Reinecke's knees.

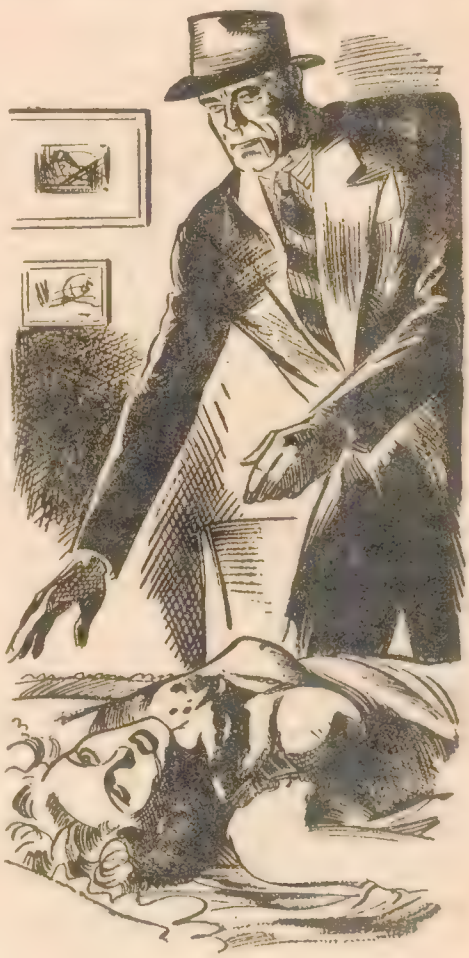
I was near enough to them. I'm built kind of heavy, so I take more than normal pride in my lightweight footwork. I sidestepped in. I caught Reinecke's sizzling uppercut in my open left palm, as if I were catching a baseball. It felt as if I'd got my mitt on a Bob Feller fireball.

The wallop that would have done a wicked face-lifting job on Gerald spent itself harmlessly in my receding hand. I cut the edge of my right palm, held horizontal, into Reinecke's midriff. I did it exactly the way we were taught in Judo class. He started to fold up like an old road-map.

I CLOSED up my fire-call-catching duke which still stung like the dickens, and nailed a choppy left on the pugnacious one's button. The jaw-crack sounded like the knell of parting day. At least, the lights went out for somebody.

Reinecke hit the rug like a spent buffalo.

Fink barged out of the murder room.



I spilled her over on her back. She didn't speak.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, you shnuckle?" he raved at me.

I blew on my burning knuckles. "Sorry," I said lightly. "I had to flatten him."

"*You're* sorry!" sputtered Fink. "How do you think he'll feel when those canaries he's listening to sign off?" Then he drew down his brows in painful concentration. "Who is he, anyway?"

Gerald was still rooted to one spot, swaying. "Tom Reinecke," he winced.

Fink flipped back the skirts of his gunclub checked coat and parked his fists on his hips with the swivel-chair spread. "So he's a friend of yours!"

Gerald shook his head. "No," he cor-

rected. "His wife is."

"That explains it," said Fink with a sage nod that wouldn't fool anybody. He called a bluecoat in from the hall. "Drag this lug down to the looby," he directed, "and hold him till we're ready to send him to the cleaners."

As the copper jacked the bulk of Tom Reinecke up and was hauling it out, the medical examiner moused in.

"Hey!" hollered the medical examiner in alarm. "Drop that body where it is! Ain't you got the horsesense not to touch—!"

For a second the cop looked scared. "I thought this one was alive."

"He is!" growled Fink. "The body's in the bedroom, doc."

The medical examiner cleared his throat loudly to retrieve his dignity. "Well, they've been through this enough times to know better, but I wouldn't put it past . . ." He was fumbling into the bedroom.

After throwing another condemning glance at me, Fink followed the medical examiner out of the room.

Gerald began to claw at my lapels. He mouthed wetly, "That's going on all the time, Tudor."

"What is? Oh, you mean free one-twos from two-timed husbands?"

The headful of poodle curls wobbled. "That's right." He was getting his vocabulary back with a rush. "Those guys are dangerous. They think they own those women they're married to. Up to tonight—just now—I thought I could handle them myself. But no more, Tudor, no more. I need a bodyguard." He drooled on my vest.

"So I'm elected?"

"Yes, Tudor," he babbled. "Say you'll protect me. Any fee."

I threw back my shoulders, took a deep manly breath, and thought that this was better than being a bedroom beagle. Not much better, but a definite indication of improvement. I said, "If all those palzy-walzies of yours lead with their right, I can stop them." I paused to consider the money end, which was very important. "And my fee—"

But Gerald had keeled over into the swallowing easy chair and was already starting to snore heavily.

I know I must have looked wistful gazing down at the slumbering scion. "A man who can drop off like that," I said to nobody in particular, "either has a clear conscience or he mixes his drinks."

A blustering commotion at the suite door made me wheel that way.

"Let me in! My name's Henstowe!" a voice said in a manner that showed clearly that the owner of the name was used to getting instant respect.

The copper at the door stopped straight-arming and skipped aside.

IN he blew. The boss with the bay-window and the tangled feet was Gerald's papa, Allen Henstowe, the wealthy investment banker, whose income tax alone ran into astronomical figures. A shiny topper canted back on his four-white hair and he was all fussed up in a boiler-plate shirtfront and tails. The dazzling white dickey bulged like the capitol dome. His face was as rudy as Gerald's was chalky. And if Gerald was a minnow, his old man was a whale.

The banker was as drunk as a bunghole. I guess nobody in that family could resist the silly soup. Gin was inherited with the genes.

Paying no attention to his pixilated pride and joy, Allen Henstowe oozed toward the middle door.

"Hey!" I said loudly. "You can't go in there!"

The blimp shot me a look that said, "From now on, galoot, you're on my stink list!"

Old Henstowe rolled up to the bedroom door like a wave on a beach, then rolled back again. And stayed back. He had seen enough.

His ruddy face was wrung pink when he faced me again.

Fink appeared in the door. "Who're you?" he asked the tottering moneybags.

"That girl's father-in-law."

"What do you know about it?"

"Nothing."

"Sit there till I'm through with the M.E." Fink went back in.

Henstowe collapsed on a frilly chaise-longue and began to get some of his high color back. He floated his eyes in my direction. "Got a flask on you?" he asked me shakily.

"Nope. Turned mine in for scrap."

Henstowe studied my face as if he were trying to read a letter in a foreign language. "Haven't I seen you someplace before?" he said, keeping on peering.

"You might have," I said, "if you frequent the better bowling alleys. Your son hired me to dream up his divorce. It turned into a nightmare."

Henstowe shifted his hulk to one end of the longue. "Sit here. Got something to say to you."

I sat down beside him and asked him what he wanted.

"You're a detective," said Henstowe. He didn't use the sarcasm that most people do when they make that statement to me. "I want you to solve this case for me. If you'll work for me, I'll tell you things I won't tell anybody else."

Every time he opened his lips he singed the day's stubble on my face with rye fumes. Yet as slopping over with tonsil-paint as he was, he was still cagey enough to figure that if I dug up anything unsavory about the Henstowes while I was hired to him, it would come back directly to him and not go to the police.

"What's in it for me?" I asked.

"A bucket of money."

I grinned. "Green's my favorite color."

But before I started investigating for him, I wanted a down payment on the last chapter right now.

Old Henstowe grubbed a red leather-covered checkbook out of his formal jeans. "I'll write you a check."

I said, "What's happened to that fine old institution known as cold cash?"

"Never carry it. So filthy, so sordid."

"I wish somebody'd rub a little more of that filth on me."

"Checks and credits are a rich man's way of doing business. You'll have to accept it," he said with finality.

"Of course I will," I said. "But I thought you'd have a sack of potatoes in your hip pocket. Weren't you all set to spend the evening pub-crawling?"

HE bridled. "My dear sir! Julia and I were going to the opera! *Die Gotterdammerung!* I was going to throw my shoes at the crystal chandelier and turn summersets across the rotunda." He glared at me. "Haven't you the slightest regard for the finer things?"

"I have," I said, glancing guiltily over my shoulder. "Whenever I hear the *Liebestod* from *Tristan and Isolde* I think it's so beautiful I get cold shivers down my spine."

"Now it's all over. Damn it!"

He wobbled a fountain-pen over one of the shrimp-pink slips and handed over the hundred-dollar retainer check. "Shake?"

We shook. He had a soft, padded palm, like a pincushion with five fingers.

He got dewy-eyed. "Julia was my pet daughter-in-law," he said as if he had a harem of them. "Find her murderer." Money does everything.

I put careful creases in the check and tucked it away in the inner fold of my wallet along with my social security card. I lovingly patted the lump the wallet made in my breast pocket. I was going from better to best.

Then, to earn my money, I tried to be harsh and unrelenting like Philip Marlowe. "This means questions. What was Julia doing up here?"

Old Henstowe hesitated a split second, then he replied, "I talked her into it."

I mapped my course charily. "You mean you talked her into a reconciliation with Gerald?"

A smile spread itself all over Henstowe's florid phiz. "That's it. That's it exactly. Julia was the only one who wanted that divorce. I hated to see them break up. They could be so happy together. Gerald has a rather roving eye.

for the girls, and don't we all, but he's always loved Julia. I pestered her all day today to see him once more. To talk it over like grownups; not to act like a couple of sulky kids. Julia had her principles and her pride, but she had a sense of obligations too. At last she saw it my way and she came here with me tonight. We waited downstairs in the lobby for that girl."

"Laura Griffith?" My heart gave a little bound. "Did you see her?"

"Of course. She came in on time. We waylaid her and told her that Julia was going up in her place."

"How did Laura act?" I asked eagerly. "Did she seem relieved?"

Henstowe cranked his blubbery face around to blink at me. The banker had the same stupid look as his offspring. It was a father-to-son hand-me-down. "I didn't particularly notice," he said.

"Well, what happened then?"

"Nothing. Julia had a little private talk with this Laura person, then she went upstairs alone. I waited downstairs."

"Where did Laura Griffith go?"

Henstowe blinked again and shook his head. "I don't know. What's so important about her?"

Look, pal, I said to myself, *you must be getting very old if you haven't noticed—*

I said, "Was Julia wearing a ring on the middle finger of her left hand tonight?"

"She was when she left the house," he said.

"Describe it."

Henstowe rattled it off. "Diamond solitaire on a pink gold band. Portuguese-cut stone, two carats. I gave it to her for her birthday. Why?"

That was the ring that *wasn't* on Julia's finger now. I let him wonder about it.

"The way I get it," I said, "all of you knew that Julia would be up here instead of Laura."

"Gerald didn't know. Gerald's too saturated to know anything." He smirked at his sprawled son.

"Maybe." I kept a level stare at Henstowe. "Did you wipe out Julia?"

Henstowe started to chortle at that absurdity—then he rang off in delayed-reaction shock. "Good Lord! No!"

FINK came out and stood over us. With a well-gnawed toothpick he jimmied something loose from between his fangs and held up a morsel of corned beef hash. Presumably part of his dinner. "Well, Mr. Big," he said disrespectfully to Henstowe, "been keeping your evidence preserved in alcohol for me?"

Henstowe rose up in wrath like a juice-logged rheumatic at a seventh inning stretch. "I'll ask you to keep a civil tongue in your head!"

I got up beside him and laid a quieting hand on his arm. "Don't let him jar you, Henstowe. Fink's of the all-bull-and-brass-knucks school. And his grade is kindergarten. When you look at him, you're looking at three heels in one pair of shoes. Answer the pay-off question, Fink. Does the doc know what kind of a sticker killed Julia?"

"It was something like a steel knitting needle," Fink told me with ill grace.

Henstowe slavered on his boiled shirt-front. His alcoholic exhaust was terrific. "That's it!" he gibbered.

I swung to him. "What's it?"

"Girls knit," he answered with a silly grin.

I looked blackly at him. He was making a reference to Laura. He'd unhesitatingly shove the guilt on anybody handy in order to detour it away from his son. Only the check in my flat-chested wallet prevented me from telling the old tyrant where to go.

"That's right," Fink was agreeing with a fishy leer.

I said harshly, "Did you find it?"

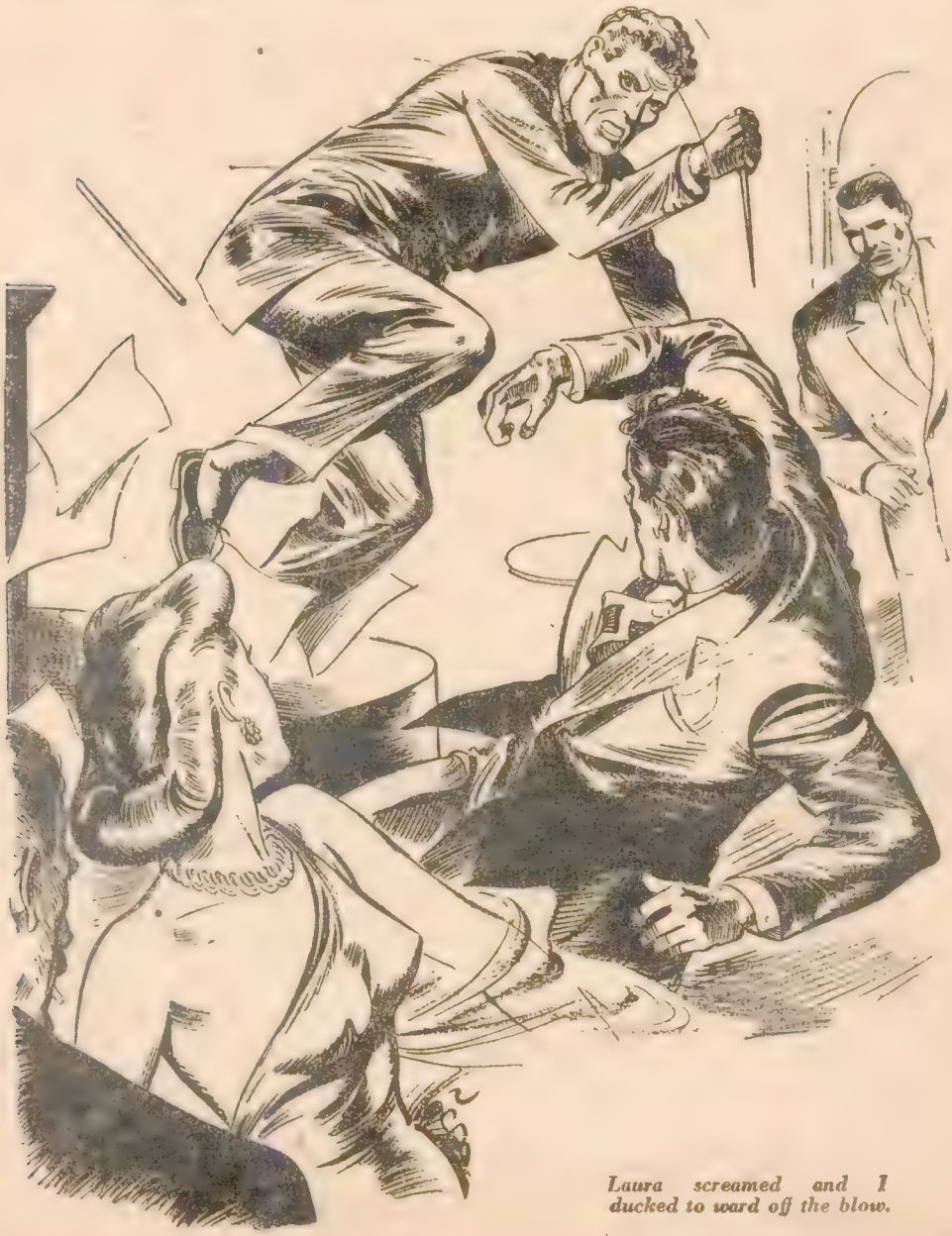
"No," Fink had to admit, "nor anything else except a very dead corpse." He said loudly to his men, "Haven't you birds found that knife yet? Do I have to show you how to do everything?"

They all shook their heads and looked as dumb as Fink.

Henstowe leaned toward me and sprayed a question in my ear. "Ask him if he thinks Gerald did it."

"Do you think Gerald did it?" I asked obediently.

"That depends on where we find the knife. According to what you told me, Tudor, Gerald was locked in here with Julia's dead body. But if we don't find the knife in this suite, that means that somebody else took it away. A fact which might clear Gerald. Gerald didn't take it away. He claims he was in the suite all evening, having himself a stew." Fink looked at me. "Yeah, Tudor, I heard you quizzing the drunk. I keep an ear open." He tugged the lobe of one of the sails on the side of his head.



Laura screamed and I ducked to ward off the blow.

I said, "It narrows it down to this: If the knife's in here, Gerald did it. If the knife's not here, it stands to reason that somebody else did it and carried the knife away."

"Keep it up, Tudor," he encouraged sardonically, "and you'll think like a cop some day."

"That's the day I'll open a gas-jet," I said. "What's your verdice, Fink? Is the knife in the suite?"

The answer came back in relays from his men: No!

I turned slowly until I was looking straight at the vacuum cleaner in a shadowy corner. I'd noticed it there even before the police came. "What's that doing in here?"

"Probably left by some forgetful chambermaid," guessed Fink.

"It's in the bag," I said.

Fink led the mad dash for the vacuum cleaner. One of the dicks hauled out a shiv and slashed the cleaner's dust-bag to ribbons. While this was going on, old Henstowe stood looking at me, a thundercloud on his brow.

Then Fink looked up at me, his face flushed and mottled with dust. "The knife ain't in the bag, you shlepper!"

I COULDN'T think of an answer right away. Fink made the Henstowes and me stay in the suite while he gave orders to turn the building inside out for the knife. They searched all of us. After a while reports began to dribble back. The knife hadn't been tossed out the eleventh floor window; the yard below had been combed. For my money, they weren't going to find it. I wanted to get away from this atmosphere. I kept needling Fink until he finally kicked me out of the suite with a warning that I myself had better have a clean bill of health.

I took an elevator to the main floor. Here the hotel was operating as if nothing had gone wrong upstairs. Business as usual. My brain was buzzing, vainly groping for a solution to the knife puzzle. I wandered instinctively toward the hotel's bar. Cutting corners around a telephone booth, I bumped spang into a breathtaking blonde. Well, at least it was the only blonde that mattered. Laura Griffith. I stepped back, the way an artist does, to view the whole picture. She was wrapped up in a fur-trimmed cloth coat, but I knew that underneath there was a fuselage that would have Esther Williams foaming at the mouth.

We bandied mutually surprised hellos. Then I said, "Where've you been keeping yourself, Laura?"

"Oh, she said in her cello voice, "I've been waiting to see how it came out."

I must have stared vacantly at her. "What came out? Beer from a spigot?"

"No, silly," she said with a laugh that drove away dull cares. "Waiting to see if the Henstowes patched it up."

My lower jaw still felt as if it were swinging loosely in a hammock. "Don't you know? Didn't you see the flatties?"

"The police?" She changed expression to a puzzled frown. "Why, I did notice that the lobby was congested with blue, but what's that got to do with you and me and the Henstowes?"

I gave her the twice-over. "You're old enough to know the truth." I led her to one of the table booths and a waiter popped up out of the linoleum at us.

We ordered cocktails. Laura wanted a Manhattan. I, a Bronx. Our taste in drinks explained a lot. Laura was smooth. I was rough around the edges.

While we were waiting for the drinks, I told her about the crime upstairs. She gradually got wan under her rouge as I went into the gory details.

The waiter set down our drinks and departed again.

"You've no idea who did such a terrible thing?" she said in a low voice.

"No," I said. "I'm as muddled as this orange in my glass." Stabbing a stuffed olive that was on an hors d'oeuvre dish with my cocktail pick, I let my eyes slither over to her hands. Some people who have poker faces forget that their hands can indicate their emotions too. I've read my quota of psychology manuals. I was doubly interested in her hands,

not because they were telling me her inner-most secrets, but because the middle finger of her left hand was hooped with a bangle-sized ring that had a diamond as big as a baby iceberg. I'd never seen her wearing that before.

Specifically, the ring was a solitaire with a Portuguese-cut diamond, about two carats, on a pink gold band.

That ring had come off Julia's dead hand.

So I chewed casually on the olive and said, "That's some hocker you're wearing, Laura. Yours?"

She moved it under the shaded lights to make it dazzle more. "Of course it is," she said.

"It must have cost a bonnet of shekels."

"How do you know it isn't an imitation?" she countered.

"I've made a special study of giddy swag," I said. "It's like you knowing about mink coats. You learn a lot about something you can't get." I let my look become more searching than ever as I went on, "Where'd you get that?"

AT first I thought she wasn't going to answer. She had dropped her eyes away from mine. She stalled with a long sip of her Manhattan. "It was given to me."

I thought jubilantly, *Here it is! That's Julia's ring! Whoever gave her that ring is the murderer!*

"Who gave it to you?" I asked.

With a crooked tilt of crimson lips she smiled. "My mother."

I felt my jaw hanging all the way down and I must have looked comical, for her smile switched to a rib-tickling laugh.

I demanded, "Are you kidding me?"

"No," she said, making efforts to erase the hilarity. "It's been in our family for four generations. All our women have worn it. I may be broke, but I wouldn't part with this ring for anything. Why are you so interested in this ring?" she asked, now looking keenly perplexed.

"Think no more of it." I sullenly went for a small dill pickle on the plate as if the new spear assault meant the end of the subject. What a cross-examiner I was!

"All right." She shrugged her padded shoulders at me. "But you pique a lady's curiosity."

I gave her my best Vic Mature glower I said to myself, "Blast it, baby, *you* pique mine!"

That finished that. Ducking the cops around the hotel, I took her home. She lived in a room she'd sublet from a lady crayon artist in the West Sixties. Not talking much, I walked her to her doorstep, made no passes at her in the crackerbox vestibule, doffed my skimmer in a coldly polite good-night and left her.

I had always thought that love was two people with the same idea and no sense. Now my head was spinning around so much my wits were too dizzy to philosophize. Only one thought was clear. I hoped she wasn't a murderess.

SOME of the morning papers made a big hasenpheffer of the murder. One of the a.m.'s called it THE VANISHING KNIFE CASE. There were detailed accounts of the length, breadth and thoroughness of Fink's search for the missing weapon. It wasn't in the hotel. It wasn't anywhere. They had also found the chambermaid who had absent-mindedly left her vacuum cleaner in Gerald's suite. The police concluded that she had no part in the crime. Questioning had also brought out that no one had seen Gerald out of his room since six o'clock, so he apparently hadn't rushed out and hid the knife someplace.

Oh yes, one of the papers mentioned that a man named *Max* Tudor, *a salesman of novelties and sundries,* had discovered the body. That sounded like one of Fink's generous handouts to the press. That was all the publicity I got.

As soon as the bank was open I skidded in with Henstowe's hundred-dollar check. I wanted to collect on it and collect fast. Supersonic Matt Tudor.

"Give it to me in small bills," I laughingly told the teller, who had a grave-

digger's face and who peered suspiciously from me to the long slip of pink paper.

"This doesn't look like Allen Henstowe's signature," he stated bluntly. "It's all wormy."

I wasn't daunted a whit as I explained, "Old A. H. was four sheets to the wind when he scratched it last night."

"I'll find out soon enough" said the teller icily. "I'll call Mr. Henstowe himself."

I grinned. "Just going to suggest that very thing. Why live in doubt?"

The teller picked up a phone, dialed, and spoke. As he hung up his look was frostbiting. "Mr. Henstowe says he never signed any check to you for any amount."

Had I gone mad? I had to grab the marble ledge in front of me to keep from pitching over. Only last night— But this was somebody else's mistake, not mine.

"Listen here, you swivel-brained—" I began to call the teller.

The teller lifted an imperious finger for help. Two cornfed, grey-uniformed bank guards shot forward like sprinters at a starter's gun.

My head felt too wobbly on my shoulders to start tangling with huskies at this time of the morning. I beat them to the street by a whisker. Then I scooted up an alley, sat on an overturned ashbarrel, and poured out my vials of wrath, raised my choler, and listened to my blood boil.

What did they think they were putting over on me anyway? Henstowe had given me that check legitimately—and Henstowe was going to make good.

Feeling full of fight, I got up off the ashbarrel, came out of the alley, and sashayed to the Henstowe mansion on Riverside Drive.

The butler opened the door, said, "Trademan's entrance at the back," and boomed it shut again.

Splashing spleen in all directions, I tramped to the rear, bopped the bell, came fuming into the kitchen, and ran into Gerald Henstowe. He was in his dressing-gown and supervising a fat female cook who was making a French omelette with watercress.

Gerald had a pained look in back of his eyes as if his head were full of broken glass. "Have some omelette?" he said fuzzily at me. "Great thing for a hangover."

I said no. I didn't have a hangover. I was short about it.

Gerald sat down and continued, his jagged mind more to business. "This bodyguarding, you know. You don't have to follow me around all the time when I'm home. It's only when I'm in public that I'm in danger of an attack."

"Sonny boy," I said darkly, "I came here to see your pater."

"I don't know whether he's in. Matter of fact, I want to see him myself and get last night clear. Ghastly about Julia, wasn't it? If I wasn't such a rumpot I might have saved her. At least I'd know who killed her." He looked remorseful. "Tell you what. You go to that room at the head of the stairs. That's the old boy's study. If he's not there, wait till I find him for you."

I nodded abruptly. "Okay." I stamped out and went up to the study.

THE room was Henstoweless. I idled around, looking at the pictures, books and ceramics. A china umbrella-stand was stuffed with canes and bumbershoots. One gold-headed walking-stick in particular looked classy. I like to handdle anything that has class. I picked the walking-stick out of the stand to heft it. Allen Henstowe's initials were on it. It was heavy, but beautifully balanced. My hand unintentionally twisted the gold head and it came loose.

With a metallic sigh a two-foot ribbon of needle-pointed steel whispered from a shaft of the stick. I breathed, "A sword-cane!"

Ideas started popping in my head like roasted corn kernels.

Then a cultured voice said, "This way, miss."

I dropped the sheathed sword back into the umbrella-stand and skipped to

the half-open study door. The butler went past the door like a Mack truck, Laura Griffith floating after him.

More surprises?

I heard a door close farther down the hall, then the butler rumbled back alone.

I stepped out of the study and intercepted him. "Is old Henstowe around?"

The butler surveyed me sourly, "*Mister* Henstowe is engaged with a young lady at the present moment," he sniffed discouragingly.

Gerald was padding up the stairs in his carpet slippers. He said, "All right, Fellowes. I'll take care of this." The butler waddled off with duck-like dignity. Gerald led me down the hall. "The old boy uses this next room as an office when he's home. Binge or no binge, he starts his work-day at nine sharp every morning. I don't know how he does it. He drinks a gallon to my quart, yet he's always back among the living bright and early. That doesn't say much for the younger generation, does it? I wish I had his"—Gerald opened the door—"Hello!"

Laura Griffith was backed up against the wall, staring wild-eyed at the convincer in old Allen Henstowe's hand. It was a small nickel-plated toylike gat that could do damage in these narrow quarters. Old Henstowe looked like a highly respectable highwayman. His eyes were bloodshot but determined.

"Ah!" he crowed. "I've got both the felons in one sack!" The oscar in his hand moved to cover me, too. "Get away from him, Gerald," he warned his son. "If this goes off there's no telling who it'll hit. Call the police, Gerald."

Gerald stepped nearer the bleached oak desk, but he didn't touch the phone. He said, "Act your age, pop. "What's this—?"

I was beginning to resent the situation and all its implications. My bellow cut in, "Where do you get off calling us felons?"

Henstowe pointed his left forefinger at the desktop and directed remarks to his son. "You see that ring!" My eyes followed Gerald's to the sparkler on the deskpad. It was a diamond solitaire, Portuguese-cut, et cetera, et cetera. The same hunk of jewelry that Laura had been sporting the night before. "It's Julia's!"

I felt for Laura. I glanced at her. She was biting her lower lip to keep it from trembling.

Gerald was saying, "It's Julia's all right."

"This woman"—Henstowe's accusing finger switched to Laura—"came to me just now with that ring demanding money for it. She stripped it off Julia's finger like a ghoul when she committed the murder!"

Laura's lips flew apart. "That's not true! You saw your daughter-in-law give me that ring in the lobby before she went upstairs to Gerald's suite!"

HENSTOWE spat a short malicious laugh. "It'd be easier for you if you told the truth. I'm cooking both your geese together—you and that forger!" He glared at me.

I was seething. "The last man who called me that ended up in the fracture ward."

Henstowe sneered. "Thought you could put over a shoddily forged check on my bank, did you?"

I hollered, "You gave it to me last night!"

"If I gave you anything I would've remembered it," the banker blasted back at me. "And I don't even remember *seeing* you last night!"

For an instant my knees sagged. The old boy was a victim of alcoholic amnesia. Drink made him skeezy, made another man out of him.

He didn't wait for me to say anything. I couldn't think of anything anyway. He bawled at his son, "Are you going to call those police?"

Gerald stood dumbfounded. He couldn't make up his mind.

The red-faced old ogre gnashed his teeth, circled around, and reached out his left to do his own phoning. "I'll do

it!" He growled, shaking his head.

It was then that I did it.

Henstowe had put the desk between us. Hurdling high, I launched myself feet-first across the desk. Landing flat on my back on the desk-blotter, my legs scissored on Henstowe's gun-arm. I caught the banker's left in both my hands and twisted it away from the phone. Henstowe howled in the nutcracker grip of my legs and dropped the nickel-plated gat. Laura was a bright, eager girl. She pounced on it.

I loosened my holds and rolled sideways off the desk. I whirled to Laura's side and took control of the baby artillery.

Gerald was watching all this with an amused smile, like a cynic watching freaks cavort in a sideshow. He was standing well out of harm's way, hands in dressing-gown pockets.

His old man was in the opposite mood. His face was purple with rage. He raved across the desk, "I'll have you hunted down like a lousy rat and drawn and quartered for this!" he boiled.

I trained the hardware on him. "You were so rumdumb last night you don't remember what you did," I flung back. "If you don't remember giving me the check, you'll never remember Julia giving Laura the ring in the lobby. The ring has nothing to do with the murder." I was eagerly trying to convince myself of that last statement.

Henstowe yelped, "You're not only a forger, you're that murderess's accomplice! I'll have mincemeat made of the pair of you!"

I linked my free arm in Laura's and backed her to the door. "Laura never committed any murder. But I have a slant on who did. You're going to get your killer, you rye-soaked rip, if I bust a gut doing it for nothing. It'll be a pleasure."

I maneuvered Laura out of the house and into a taxi without getting pursued. The Henstowes wouldn't try any personal heroics. Old Henstowe would be phoning the cops.

Laura was silent. As we bowled along I asked her, "What'd Julia give you the ring for?"

"To pay me off. It was really only a security. Neither Julia nor Mr. Henstowe had any money with them last night. I suppose that's why he gave you the check. I was to go to the house today and collect cash for the ring. Julia knew I hadn't actually done anything to earn it, but she was a tender-hearted person and that was her way of helping a girl out."

"Why didn't you tell me Julia gave it to you when I asked you last night?"

"I was afraid you'd want your usual split," she said, her gorgeous lamps twinkling. "Fifty per cent. Half."

"Well, I'll be—!" I chewed silently on the tailend of that crack for a moment. then leaned forward to stop the cab near a corner drug store. "Wait," I said. "Only be a minute."

I went into a public toll box, dug up a lonely nickel. kissed it for luck, and rang up Fink at Homicide.

After I told him who I was he responded with a sleepy growl. He said, "Are you still at large?"

"Ha, ha!" I said sarcastically. "Who's writing your material for you these days? Your clients?" I thought that was pretty good because all of his clients were stiffs. I could feel Fink starting to hang up. I hurried on with, "Find the murder weapon yet?"

"No," he grumbled. "Any bright suggestions?"

"Did the autopsy show anything unusual?"

"Yeah," he rasped. "Now we know she was stabbed."

"Routine post-mortem report?" I said. "Brain, lungs, abdominal organs?"

"See the medics. I'm busy having a headache."

"I know where the knife is," I said like the little smart boy. "The case is solved. It's in the bag."

"What? Where?" I could picture him scratching his stubble-haired noggin.

"It's in the bag," I repeated, then I

hung up and went back to the waiting cab.

THE Starlit Terrace atop the Century House had its wall lights dimmed. A baby spot had its long, brilliant finger on a bulgy blonde in a black rayon-satin gown that had no room in it for wrinkles. She was warbling to the accompaniment of Gerald Henstowe's band. Gerald himself stood on the podium, waving his swingsters along while keeping one greedy eye on the voluptuously curved canary.

Gerald hadn't picked out Laura and me in the supper crowd. I was still feeling warm around the ears from that last dance with Laura. She must have been the gal who taught Madame LaZonga. I sat with her at one of the tables, paying no attention to the sleek singer. I was grinning like a jay at something much better at my own table.

The satin-gowned warbler booted her song home at the last bar, took a deep low bow which was deliberately intended to rock the male customers, was encouraged to sing an encore, then she vamoosed. Gerald put down his baton to give his boys five. A master of ceremonies, who looked as if he hadn't missed a meal in his life, came out on the floor and showed teeth like give-away dishes at your neighborhood movie house.

As he started to crack a few corny gags—at which the customers generously howled to prevent his embarrassment—I leaned toward Laura and said, "Excuse me, Laura. This won't take a jiffy." I rose and slid out on the floor.

I didn't feel quite that optimistic. This may take a hell of a lot longer than a jiffy.

The emcee eyed me with a frightened look as he saw me coming. I guess he thought that the revenge of Joe Miller was catching up with him at long last. I shouldered the sputtering emcee aside and stepped to the podium. Gerald's cornflower eyes widened.

"What's this, Tudor?" he said in an undertone. "You don't have to guard me to the extent of breaking the floor show."

"Who's guarding you, you little punk?" I said in an ugly tone. I wanted to spike him to action. "I want the evidence."

I TURNED my head for a moment to grin at the tables. I got some applause from people who thought I was a little tanked up with coffin varnish and wanted to show off a bit. The emcee had given up entirely. He stood there, undecided what to do next. He might have rushed me if I were smaller than he was.

I spun on my heel to Gerald. "Give me your ivory baton!"

I didn't have to pull this bluff in public. But why should I hide my talent? I want publicity.

Gerald was giving me a long, almost stupid stare. "Beat it, Tudor, before you have a lapful of trouble."

"It's on the ledge of your music stand," I said. "Give it to me, little rich boy, or I'll get up there and take it."

He felt slowly along the edge of the music stand and lifted up the ivory baton. "You'll keep your hands off it!" His eyes were suddenly wet with impotent anger. He didn't want the bad boy to take his precious little stick.

I said out loud so that the whole terrace could hear, "That one belongs to a set, doesn't it? It's just like the one you stabbed Julia with!"

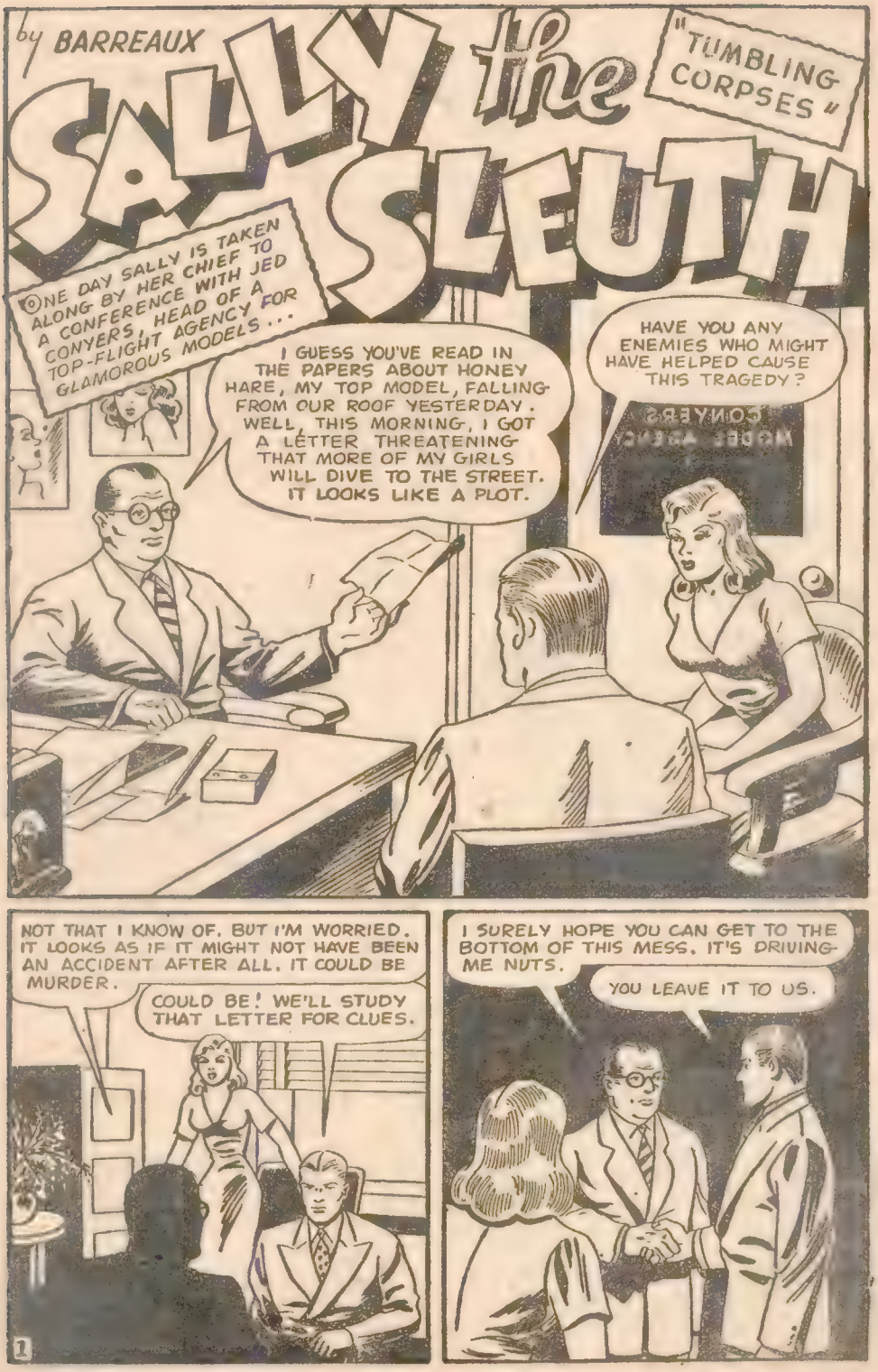
His eyes were turning from wet cornflowers to wet poppies. From blue to red. "I'll give it to you, damn you, Tudor!" he snarled.

With a flick of the wrist he separated the butt of the baton from the slim shaft. It was a miniature sword-stick! A thin glittering spine appeared in his rising hand. "Here it is, smart boy Tudor!"

Over the sudden rumpus at the tables I heard Laura's warning scream.

Gerald lunged off the podium, striking overhand at my heart. I ducked my head under my uplifted left arm, slightly angled at the elbow. Gerald's downcoming forearm glanced off my crooked elbow. His spiny weapon found a lodging place

(Continued on page 119)

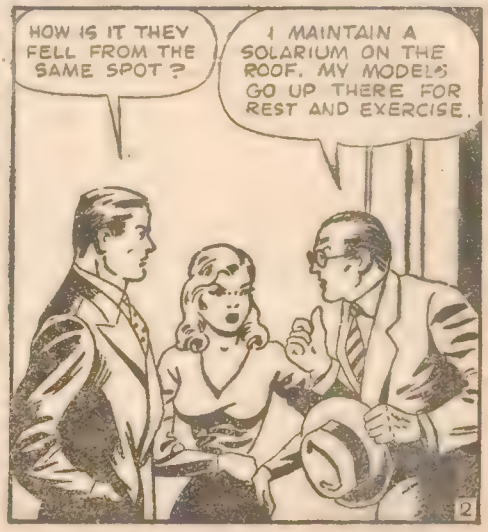

by BARREAUX
SALLY the SLEUTH
"TUMBLING CORPSES"
ONE DAY SALLY IS TAKEN ALONG BY HER CHIEF TO A CONFERENCE WITH JED CONYERS, HEAD OF A TOP-FLIGHT AGENCY FOR GLAMOROUS MODELS...
I GUESS YOU'VE READ IN THE PAPERS ABOUT HONEY HARE, MY TOP MODEL, FALLING FROM OUR ROOF YESTERDAY. WELL, THIS MORNING, I GOT A LETTER THREATENING THAT MORE OF MY GIRLS WILL DIVE TO THE STREET. IT LOOKS LIKE A PLOT.
HAVE YOU ANY ENEMIES WHO MIGHT HAVE HELPED CAUSE THIS TRAGEDY?
NOT THAT I KNOW OF. BUT I'M WORRIED. IT LOOKS AS IF IT MIGHT NOT HAVE BEEN AN ACCIDENT AFTER ALL. IT COULD BE MURDER.
COULD BE! WE'LL STUDY THAT LETTER FOR CLUES.
I SURELY HOPE YOU CAN GET TO THE BOTTOM OF THIS MESS. IT'S DRIVING ME NUTS.
YOU LEAVE IT TO US.
1

BUT NEXT DAY, ANOTHER CURVACEOUS CUTIE TUMBLES FROM THE SKY BEFORE HORRIFIED ONLOOKERS . . .

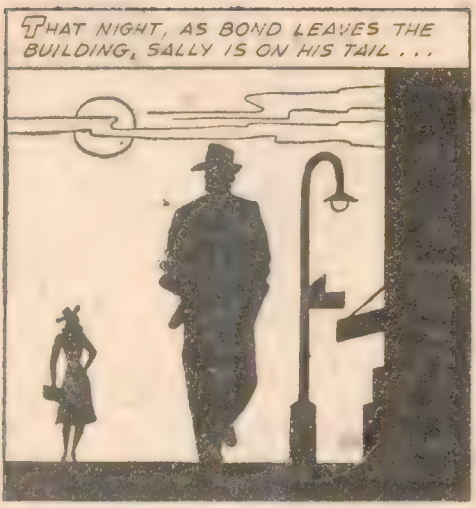
POOR GIRL!
THAT'S THE SAME BUILDING THE OTHER ONE FELL FROM!

I'M QUITTING YOU, MR. CONYERS!
BUT— GIRLS!
I WANT TO STAY ALIVE!

JET JENNINGS WAS MY SECOND MOST POPULAR MODEL. YOU MUST DO SOMETHING!!
THIS IS REALLY SERIOUS. THESE TWO DEATHS WERE NO ACCIDENTS.

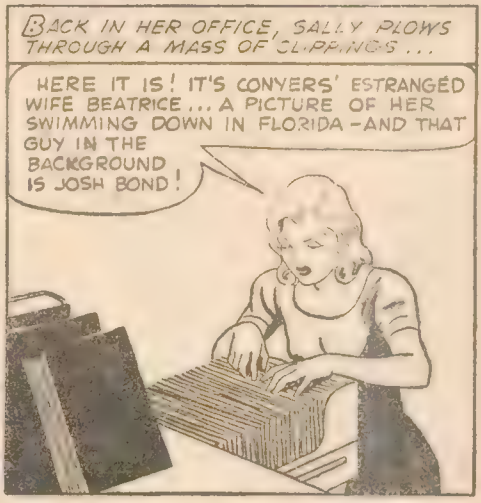

HOW IS IT THEY FELL FROM THE SAME SPOT?
I MAINTAIN A SOLARIUM ON THE ROOF. MY MODELS GO UP THERE FOR REST AND EXERCISE.
2

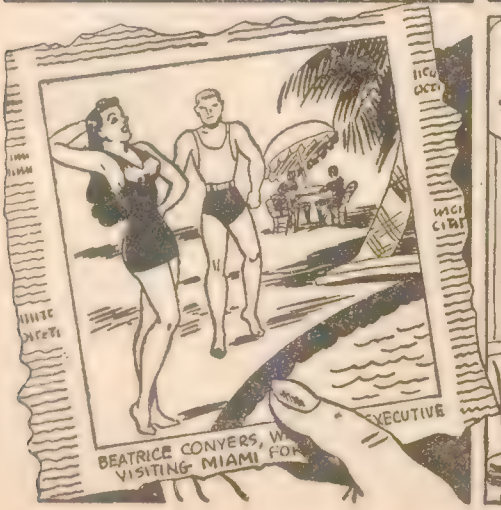
WELL, THIS IS WHAT WE'LL DO -- SALLY WILL BECOME ONE OF YOUR MODELS.. GIVE HER PLENTY OF BUILD-UP.
THAT GAL DOESN'T NEED ANY BUILD-UP.
LOTS OF PUBLICITY - SPREAD THE NEWS AROUND THAT SHE'S A NEW "FIND" AND YOU'RE GROOMING HER FOR A TOP SPOT.
I'D LOVE TO BE A MODEL!
NEXT DAY, CONYERS SHOWS SALLY AROUND, INCLUDING THE ROOF...
THIS IS OUR SOLARIUM, AND JOSH BOND, OUR ATHLETIC DIRECTOR.
HOW DO YOU DO?
HELLO -
SHE'S MY NEWEST MODEL, JOSH, AND SHE'S A DARLING!
- AND I ADORE MR CONYERS. HE'S A WONDERFUL BOSS.
AFTER CONYERS HAS RETURNED TO HIS OFFICE SALLY STAYS ON THE ROOF AND WATCHES THE ATHLETIC DIRECTOR...
MY, THE PLACE IS DESERTED! WONDER WHERE THAT BOND GUY WENT --
THERE HE IS -- WHOM CAN HE BE PHONING TO -?
3


THAT NIGHT, AS BOND LEAVES THE BUILDING, SALLY IS ON HIS TAIL . . .

. . . AND WATCHES HIM MEET HIS "DATE".
I WONDER WHO SHE IS --?
'LO, JOSH
HI, BABY. LET'S GO IN HERE WHERE WE CAN TALK.
BAR

SALLY FOLLOWS AND KEEPS THEM IN VIEW, BUT CANNOT GET NEAR ENOUGH TO OVERHEAR THE CONVERSATION . . .
THAT DAME'S FACE IS FAMILIAR -- WHERE HAVE I SEEN IT BEFORE ?

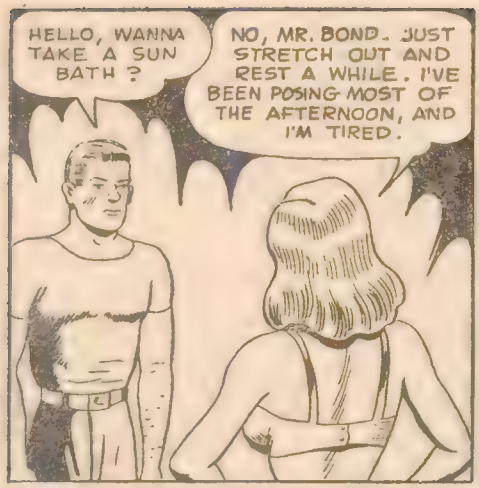

BACK IN HER OFFICE, SALLY PLOWS THROUGH A MASS OF CLIPPINGS . . .
HERE IT IS! IT'S CONVERS' ESTRANGED WIFE BEATRICE . . . A PICTURE OF HER SWIMMING DOWN IN FLORIDA - AND THAT GUY IN THE BACKGROUND IS JOSH BOND!


BEATRICE CONVERS, W
VISITING MIAMI FO
EXECUTIVE

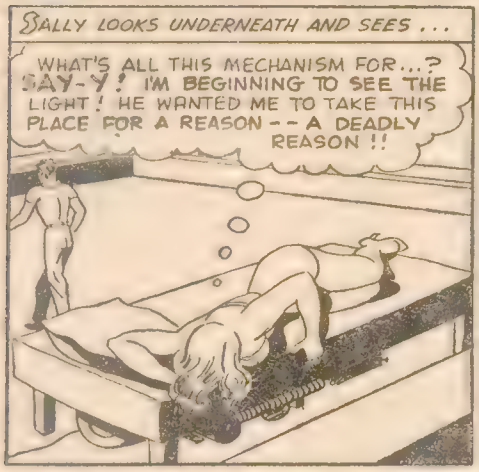
CHIEF, WHAT'S THE DIRT ON CONVERS' WIFE ? ISN'T THERE SOMETHING SCREWY THERE ?
OH THAT WAS QUITE A SCANDAL LAST YEAR. HE WANTED A DIVORCE TO MARRY ONE OF HIS MODELS BUT. ALL HE GOT WAS A SEPARATION.
4

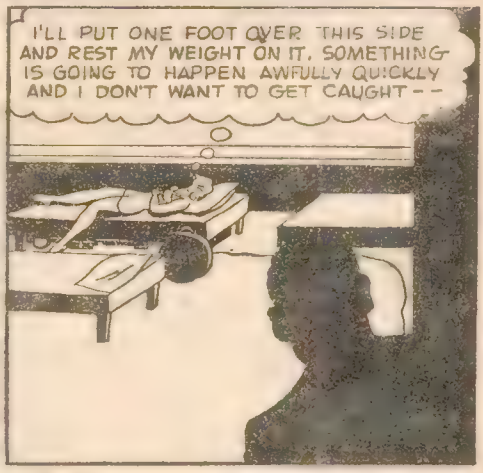
SHE HAS BEEN PRETTY BITTER TOWARDS HIM EVER SINCE AND DOES EVERYTHING SHE CAN TO HURT HIM, I HEAR.
YES, BUT DO YOU THINK SHE HAS A HAND IN THE DEATH OF THOSE GIRLS?
THAT'S FOR YOU TO FIND OUT. THIS JOSH BOND ANGLE LOOKS FISHY. PLAY UP TO CONYERS AND GIVE HER EVERY REASON TO BE JEALOUS. MAYBE SHE WILL TIP HER MITT.
SALLY IS SOON SEEN WITH CONYERS AT FASHIONABLE NIGHT SPOTS . . .
THIS WAY, MR CONYERS.
AND AT THE RACES . . .
THEY'RE OFF!
OH, MR. CONYERS, THIS IS THRILLING!
AND SOON THE GOSSIP COLUMNISTS BEGIN TO MENTION THEM . .
JED CONYERS AND HIS NEW GLAMOR GIRL ARE THE NEWEST TWOSOME AT THE LATE SPOTS . .
WHO IS THE BLONDE CUTIE SEEN AROUND TOWN WITH A TOP MODEL AGENCY MAN
. . . IT LOOKS LIKE LOVE BETWEEN A PROMINENT MODEL AGENT AND HIS LATEST BLONDE FIND WHO ARE SEEN AT ALL SMART SPOTS IN
5
BUT IN THE MODEL AGENCY OFFICE . . .
SALLY, WE'RE GETTING NOWHERE FAST. ALL MY MODELS HAVE QUIT ME. . I MAY AS WELL CLOSE UP.
OH, CHEER UP. WE'LL BREAK THIS CASE SOON.

EVERYBODY IN TOWN IS LAUGHING AT ME. LOOK AT THIS CLIPPING.
JED CONYERS AGENCY REPORTED ABOUT TO FOLD UP. DEATHS OF TWO TOP MODELS STILL UNSOLVED. HIS GIRLS HAVE ALL QUIT HIS MANAGEMENT. THEIR
SALLY GOES ON THE JOB..
THAT'S GOOD, HOLD IT!
A CALL JUST CAME IN FOR A MODEL - ONLY I HAVE NO MODELS
DON'T BE SILLY! HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN THAT I'M A MODEL NOW? I'LL TAKE THE APPOINTMENT
SALLY RETURNS TO THE OFFICE AND DECIDES TO DO A LITTLE INVESTIGATING...
I THINK I'LL GO UP ON THE ROOF.
IT CERTAINLY IS LONELY UP HERE. NOW I KNOW HOW CONYERS FEELS!
6

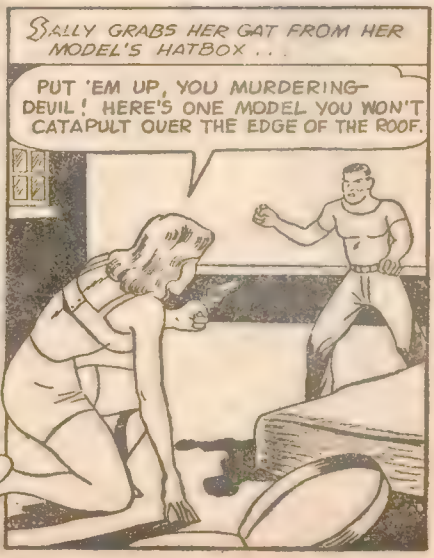

HELLO, WANNA TAKE A SUN BATH ?
NO, MR. BOND. JUST STRETCH OUT AND REST A WHILE. I'VE BEEN POSING MOST OF THE AFTERNOON, AND I'M TIRED.

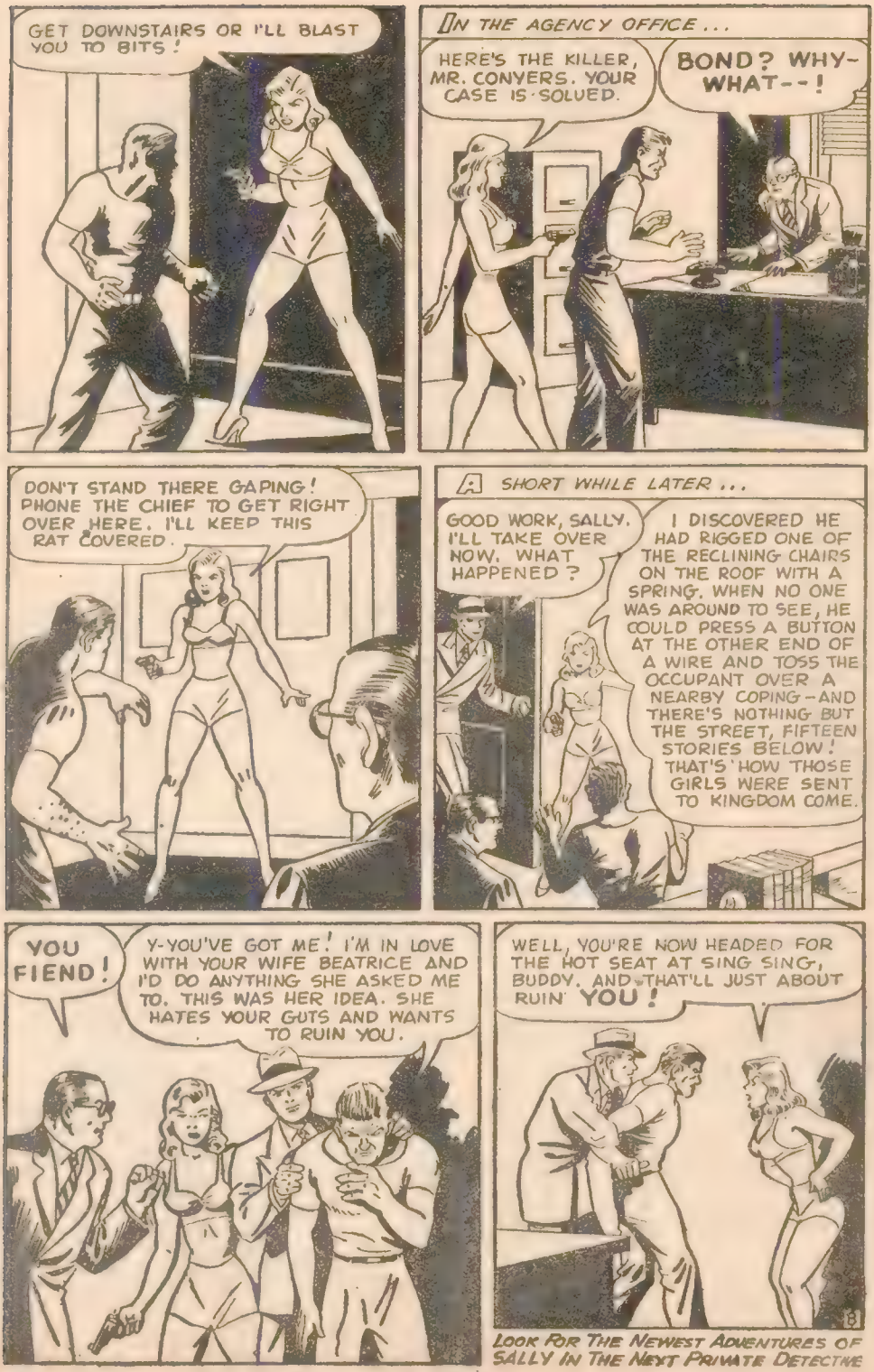
I THINK I'LL PARK HERE.
OH, TAKE THIS ONE. I ASSURE YOU IT'S A LOT MORE COMFORTABLE.


SALLY LOOKS UNDERNEATH AND SEES . . .
WHAT'S ALL THIS MECHANISM FOR...? SAY-Y! I'M BEGINNING TO SEE THE LIGHT! HE WANTED ME TO TAKE THIS PLACE FOR A REASON -- A DEADLY REASON !!


I'LL PUT ONE FOOT OVER THIS SIDE AND REST MY WEIGHT ON IT. SOMETHING IS GOING TO HAPPEN AWFULLY QUICKLY AND I DON'T WANT TO GET CAUGHT --

THERE IT GOES !
7


SALLY GRABS HER GAT FROM HER MODEL'S HATBOX . . .
PUT 'EM UP, YOU MURDERING-DEVIL! HERE'S ONE MODEL YOU WON'T CATAPULT OVER THE EDGE OF THE ROOF.


GET DOWNSTAIRS OR I'LL BLAST YOU TO BITS!
IN THE AGENCY OFFICE...
HERE'S THE KILLER, MR. CONYERS. YOUR CASE IS SOLVED.
BOND? WHY-WHAT--!
DON'T STAND THERE GAPING! PHONE THE CHIEF TO GET RIGHT OVER HERE. I'LL KEEP THIS RAT COVERED.
A SHORT WHILE LATER...
GOOD WORK, SALLY. I'LL TAKE OVER NOW. WHAT HAPPENED?
I DISCOVERED HE HAD RIGGED ONE OF THE RECLINING CHAIRS ON THE ROOF WITH A SPRING. WHEN NO ONE WAS AROUND TO SEE, HE COULD PRESS A BUTTON AT THE OTHER END OF A WIRE AND TOSS THE OCCUPANT OVER A NEARBY COPING - AND THERE'S NOTHING BUT THE STREET, FIFTEEN STORIES BELOW! THAT'S HOW THOSE GIRLS WERE SENT TO KINGDOM COME.
YOU FIEND!
Y-YOU'VE GOT ME! I'M IN LOVE WITH YOUR WIFE BEATRICE AND I'D DO ANYTHING SHE ASKED ME TO. THIS WAS HER IDEA. SHE HATES YOUR GUTS AND WANTS TO RUIN YOU.
WELL, YOU'RE NOW HEADED FOR THE HOT SEAT AT SING SING, BUDDY. AND THAT'LL JUST ABOUT RUIN YOU!
8

LOOK FOR THE NEWEST ADVENTURES OF SALLY IN THE NEXT PRIVATE DETECTIVE

TOY OF DOOM

By H. C. BUTLER

Illustrated by Newton Alfred

JOHNNY DIAMOND, private investigator, grinned crookedly at the big jack-knife stuck in the top of his desk. It was a long silver-bladed knife, and it stood at rigid attention, as though listening with unwavering interest to Diamond's wise words.

"Sharpy," Diamond said, addressing the knife, "we've been together a long time. Ever since I first used you in a knife-throwing act in show business. But I must admit I was planning to pawn you for a good meal soon, and would have, if I hadn't got that telephone call from Donna Ray. She offered me a cool grand to take a case for her—and Sharpy, that's a pile of moola."

The knife, of course, made no answer, and Diamond's grin widened. He shoved his hat into a ridiculous angle that corresponded with the grin.

"Y'know, Sharpy," he went on musingly, "it sounds like an interesting case, at that. Donna Ray is a singer at the Carlton Hotel—in the famous Gold Room. As a hobby, she collects dolls. Has a room full of them at the Carlton, where she stays. Big ones, little ones, every kind—including a lavender one."

If this was intended to make an impression on Sharpy, it didn't. The knife simply stood stiffly, waiting unemotionally for Diamond to continue his diatribe.

No one could figure out why the beautiful singer had been so cruelly murdered and what part the little lavender doll played — until Johnny Diamond took a special interest in dolls and uncovered the racket that spread violence and death!

"Guess I'll have to finish you both now!" he barked.

"Seems as though she bought this lavender doll a week ago," Diamond went on. "It's an old, grandma doll, dressed in lavender and old lace. Anyway, twice since she bought it she's received phone calls from an unidentified caller, asking her if she'd sell it. When she refused, someone broke into her hotel room and tried to steal it. At least, she thinks that's what they tried to steal. But Donna had the doll with her at the time, showing it to another collector, and the thief didn't get it. The sixty-four dollar questions is, why would anyone want to steal a doll?"

Johnny Diamond leaned back in his chair luxuriously, and gazed quizzically at the knife. Long ago he had got in the habit of voicing his thoughts to Sharpy. Speaking his thoughts aloud always helped him to keep them straight—and for a quiet, attentive listener, Sharpy was just the thing.

"I've seen Donna Ray," Diamond drawled. "She's what they call a ravishing brunette. She's done pretty well at singing, too. Understand she's expecting a call from Hollywood soon, which is why she doesn't want the police in on this investigation. Doesn't want adverse publicity to ruin her chances. Anyway, we have a date with Donna in her room at midnight, after her show, Sharpy. And that's just thirty minutes from now."

Diamond got up, stretched lazily, pulled the knife from its moorings, and snapped the blade shut.

"A cool grand," he murmured. "Let's be off."

THE elevator let Johnny Diamond off on the fourth floor. He sauntered down the hall, made a right turn at the end—and stopped abruptly.

At the door to Room 411—Donna Ray's room—stood a policeman. The door was open, and light filtered out of Donna's room, painting the hall yellow. Diamond could plainly hear voices coming from within.

Renewing his pace, Diamond tried to edge past the cop into the room. But the officer blocked him.

"Who are you, bud?" he demanded.

Johnny Diamond pushed his hat back on his head and smiled on the bias. But before he could answer a large man loomed in the doorway. He was heavy-set, with a square face and a wide mouth. He was chewing on an unlighted cigar with a sort of steady, ominous rhythm.

Diamond knew him at once. He was Sergeant Lew Mullin of Homicide. Diamond raised his eyebrows.

"If it isn't the dear sergeant," he said, trying to make it light. "What goes on here—something interesting?"

Mullin's square face hovered halfway between a grin and a frown, then settled for the frown.

"A little case of murder, that's all," he said tightly. "And maybe you'd like to tell me what *you're* doing here!"

Diamond sighed audibly. He and Mullin had never got along. They had been thrown together on previous cases, and the clash had always been violent.

"I always show up where there's murder," Diamond said. "It intrigues me so."

Mullin rewarded the remark with a baleful glance, then crooked his finger at Diamond.

"Come in here, wise guy," he rumbled.

Diamond padded into the room in a lazy, almost indifferent manner. But he wasn't feeling indifferent inside. Diamond had never been able to adjust himself to murder—especially when the victim was a pretty girl.

Donna Ray lay in the center of the room on her back. She wasn't a pretty sight. Her black hair was matted with blood where a vicious blow had caved in her skull just above the left temple. There was a darkish blue mark under one eye, where she had been struck. And down the side of her face were three long blood-red scratches.

On the floor near her body was the murder weapon—a heavy alabaster statue of a nude woman.

Johnny Diamond shuddered inwardly and looked around the room. Things were in a mess, indicating plainly that both a struggle and a search had taken place. In one corner of the room was a large table, on which sat Donna's collection of dolls. It was rather a picturesque sight—dolls of every size, shape, color and variety. Diamond's black eyebrows skidded into a frown as one thing dawned on him. There was no lavender doll on the table. It was gone!

No sign of it anywhere in the topsy-turvy mess. Where was it?

WORRIED, Diamond glanced at the other people in the room. Besides Mullin's usual retinue, there was a sandy-haired, good-looking man whom Diamond recognized as Kenny Kane, leader of the orchestra with which Donna sang. Next to him was a fat character with bulging, myopic eyes behind thick spectacles. And then there was the girl—a blond, not over twenty, with the most markedly green eyes Diamond had ever seen.

Diamond forced a grin to his face and looked at Mullin.

"Who killed her?" he asked.

Mullin's square jaw set tightly.

"Always the comedian, aren't you?" he snapped. He pointed a stubby finger at Diamond. "Maybe I ought to ask the questions. How come you're here, anyhow?"

Diamond took his knife from his pocket, snapped open the long blade, and gazed at it fondly.

"You know me, Mullin. Johnny-on-the-spot where there's murder." He shrugged lackadaisically. "Donna Ray called me. Wanted me to investigate something quietly, instead of noisily like the police. I was to meet her here at midnight, after her show."

Mullin munched slowly on the soggy cigar, making it bob up and down like something alive.

"What did she want you to investigate, chum?"

Diamond sighed. There were some aspects of the case he didn't care to reveal just yet. He decided to be vague.

"Wouldn't say over the phone, Mullin." He swept his hand around to encompass the room. "What have you got so far?"

Mullin grunted dismally.

"Not much. Murderer evidently entered by the fire-escape. There's mud on the window sill from his shoe. We've checked and found it's the same mud as in the alley below—a sort of red mud. There's also mud on the fire-escape steps too, indicating someone must have come up that way."

Johnny Diamond flipped the knife in the air. It made a complete loop and settled flatly in his palm again. Mullin watched the performance dubiously, made a mental note that Diamond was a little queer, and went on.

"There was a struggle, as you can see. Also looks like the killer went over the room searching for something. As for the murder weapon—the statue—no fingerprints. It was wiped clean."

Diamond wagged his head.

"Lovely set-up," he commented. "When did it happen?"

"About an hour ago. Donna had a space of fifteen minutes between numbers in the show downstairs. She took advantage of the time element to come upstairs for something. When she didn't reappear, they went looking for her."

Diamond's eyes drifted toward Kenny Kane, the band leader. Kane ran fingers through his sandy hair, smiled weakly.

"I got worried when she didn't come back," he explained. "So I faked in a couple of songs and sent Gottleib up to see what was detaining her.' He motioned with his hand to the fat man.

Gottleib coughed nervously. His myopic eyes looked like they would fall out of his head.

"I'm publicity agent for the band," he said. "I couldn't get an answer when I knocked on Donna's door, so I got the hotel dick. He opened the door and we found her—like this."

Diamond's black eyes switched back to Kane.

"You were leading your band, in plain view of the audience, between the time Donna sang her first number and failed to show up for her second?"

"I was." Kane nodded stiffly.

"Nice alibi," Diamond commented. He let his eyes feast for a moment on the shapely girl with the green eyes. "And you, young lady?"

The girl started nervously, twisting a tiny handkerchief she held in her hands.

"I'm Martha Lane," she said. "I double for Donna as a singer once in awhile."

Diamond grinned disarmingly.

"Looks like you've graduated," he said. "From now on you get top billing with

the band." He fingered the knife in his hand fondly. "Where were you when all this happened?"

Martha's green eyes swept up to him. Diamond noticed it was very effective.

"I was backstage," said the girl. "I doubled on one of Donna's numbers. Then Mr. Gottleib came back with the awful news, and Kenny and I came up here."

DIAMOND nodded and turned away. His sharp eyes scanned the room again. Then, suddenly, his wrist flicked and the knife went whirling into space. It imbedded itself in the table on which the dolls sat, quivering ecstatically.

"Hey!" Mullin's teeth clamped down on the cigar angrily. "Quit tossing that knife around here. You want to hurt somebody? What—"

"Found something," drawled Diamond, crossing over to where the knife was. "Lost among these dolls, it was. A very odd cigaret."

He picked up the cigaret and displayed it to Mullin. It was a flat cigaret, with a gold tip—apparently some foreign brand.

"Did Donna smoke these?" Diamond asked.

Kenny Kane crossed over, running his fingers through his sandy hair nervously.

"Donna didn't smoke at all," he said.

"Then somebody who did smoke them dropped one here. Maybe the murderer. Might have fell from his pocket as he searched the room."

Mullin started to chew the cigar with agitated savagery.

"Fine! Just fine! Now all we gotta do is scour the city, looking for somebody that smokes this nutty brand of cigaret!"

Diamond grinned slantingly and picked up one of the dolls. Attached to the back of the dress was a tiny tag. On the tag were the printed words, "The Doll House, 111 State Street." Diamond picked up several more, quietly examining them. Most of the dolls had been purchased at the same place. Diamond made a mental note of the address and turned back to Mullin wearily.

"Y'know, Mullin—this is getting downright boring" he said. "Mind if I totter along? Working for a corpse isn't bringing me any shekels."

Mullin glared from beneath lowering eyebrows.

"You can beat it the hell out of here as far as I'm concerned," he rapped. "But hang around, in case I need you, wise guy!"

Diamond nodded and flipped the knife in the air. It did two complete loops before Diamond caught it flatly in the palm of his hand. Mullin got an impatient look on his square face.

"New trick I perfected," explained Diamond. "Two loops instead of one. Very tricky. Almost sliced off a couple fingers before I got it right—"

"Beat it!" roared Mullin angrily.

Johnny Diamond beat it. He beat it straight for home. With him went a troubled mind he couldn't escape.

HE lay awake for several hours, mulling over the case. Actually, with Donna dead, there was no reason for Diamond to interest himself further in it. Yet, he couldn't divorce himself from it that easily. Diamond felt that the murder of a prospective client was intriguing enough to stick with. He fell asleep, finally, having decided to stick.

Johnny Diamond never let life rush him. He had perfected the art of doing everything with a lazy easiness that bordered on indifference. That's why he slept until mid-morning and had a quiet breakfast in a restaurant near his hotel. Finally, almost as if it was on second thought, he jumped into his jalopy and headed for the Doll House.

The Doll House was just what its name implied. It was a small, unpretentious store, selling nothing but dolls. The big showcase was a colorful panorama of them.

At the entrance to the shop Diamond almost collided with a man coming out. Apologetically, Diamond stepped back to let the man pass—and right then received a shock of surprise.

The man was a little, withered guy with a hatchet-shaped face and eyes that kept darting around in his head. They darted at Diamond briefly, then turned away as the man slithered down the street like a reptile leaving its hole.

Diamond recognized him at once. His name was Nick Boroni, and it was his reputation that caused Diamond's black eyebrows to raise. Boroni was a police character—a clever little thief who had itchy fingers for anything that was green or glittered. Diamond wondered, briefly, what he'd been doing in the doll house. Nick Boroni was hardly the type to be interested in dolls—unless it was one of those that hung out on street corners at night.

Diamond went in and was immediately accosted by a sad-faced clerk who looked like he hadn't rung up a sale in weeks. Diamond backed him up.

"No dolls," he said. "I want to see the owner of this joint."

The salesman looked sadder than ever.

"Everyone wants to see the owner—nobody wants to buy a doll," he lamented.

"Did the guy who just went out see the owner?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Police," said Diamond laconically, and it worked. The next moment he was being ushered into a small office at the rear of the store. The owner's name was Neil Potter.

Potter was a chubby little character with apple-red cheeks and pale blue eyes. He was maybe fifty years old, and looked like he hadn't had a new suit for that long. He was shabbily dressed and wore his clothes with sloppy abandon. He waved a pudgy hand at Diamond and Diamond sat down.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he asked uncertainly.

Diamond shoved his hat back on his head.

"My name's Diamond," he drawled. "Private investigator, working on a case. A murder case."

"Murder?" Potter's pale blue eyes widened. "If there's anything I can do—"

A man stood just inside the Office door, gun leveled.

DIAMOND grinned. He let his blackish eyes drift along Potter's desk to a large color photograph standing in one corner. It gave Diamond a slight start when he saw it. The color photograph was a portrait of a girl, not much over twenty, with very distinctive green eyes.

It was Martha Lane, the girl who doubled for Donna Ray in Kenny Kane's band. The same girl he had seen in Donna's hotel room, with Kane and Gottleib and Sergeant Mullin!

Diamond waved a hand at the picture lazily.

"Your daughter?" he asked carefully.

"My wife," said Potter bluntly.

There was a tone in Potter's voice that urged Diamond on.

"She's beautiful—and young," he said easily.

Potter shot Diamond a hard look.

"Too young for me," he said sharply. "I should have known. We're planning a divorce." He broke off suddenly, looked

irritated. "Now what is it you want, Mr. Diamond?"

Diamond slouched down in his chair, resting on his neck.

"Y'know, Potter—that's a good question," he murmured. "First of all, you might tell me what Nick Boroni was doing here. He's a cheesey character, and I don't think he wanted to buy a doll. What did he want?"

Potter's fat face slid into a frown, and he drummed with stubby fingers on the desk top, nervously.

"This is very unusual," he complained. "Mr. Boroni was actually in here to get a doll. We wanted a particular kind for a niece of his. An Eskimo doll, to be exact. Rather a difficult order to fill, but I think I can find one for him."

Diamond smiled. It was a good lie, thought up very quickly. He decided that Potter's mind was considerably sharper than the way he wore his clothes.

"Do you know Donna Ray, the singer at the Carlton?" he asked suddenly.

Potter nodded his round head.

"Yes, of course. She's one of my best customers. Always bought a lot of dolls here for her collection."

"She won't buy any more," Diamond said. "She's been murdered."

Potter's face blanched a little.

"Murdered!"

"It happened last night, about eleven o'clock. Her room at the Carlton was mussed up, as if somebody searched for something. A lavender doll, maybe."

Diamond watched closely, but saw no trace of recognition in Potter's face at mention of the lavender doll. So he went on.

"Did you sell Donna a lavender doll recently—one dressed up like an old lady in lavender and old lace."

Potter pursed his lips, thought a moment.

"I seem to recall such a doll," he said finally. "I think my clerk sold it to her, about a week ago."

Diamond took his knife from his pocket, pressed a button on the handle. The long silvery blade popped open, and Potter's eyes bulged.

"Would such a doll be valuable? Valuable enough that somebody might want to steal it?"

"No." Potter's answer was prompt. "We'd sell such a doll for ten to fifteen dollars. Hardly enough to induce a man to steal it—or murder for it."

POTTER leaned back in his chair, took out a cigaret and lit it carefully. Johnny Diamond felt a slight twinge of excitement go through him as he saw it. It was a flat, foreign-made cigaret. The same kind he had found in Donna's room!

"Smoke those all the time?" Diamond said conversationally.

Potter nodded again.

"Yes. it's an imported Turkish brand. Very fine tobacco."

Diamond's eyes almost automatically dropped to Potter's shoes. This time he wasn't surprised. A thin edging of mud showed on his shoes—a reddish mud like that found in the alley under Donna's room, and on Donna's window sill!

Diamond flipped his knife in the air, catching it easily and without effort as it descended.

"Did you know Donna Ray personally?" he asked.

Potter looked impatient.

"No! And listen here, fellow. If you think I'm mixed up in Donna Ray's murder, you got another think coming."

Diamond looked at the cigaret in Potter's mouth and the mud on his shoes, and grinned crookedly.

"No doubt," he said softly.

Just then the door to Potter's office opened abruptly and a uniformed cop strode in. The cop took a quick look around and said: "Neil Potter?"

Potter identified himself, hesitantly.

Sergeant Mullin of Homicide asked me to pick you up on the Donna Ray case," said the cop. "He noticed she bought a lotta dolls from you and figured you might know a few things about her. Anyway, he wants to ask a few questions."

Potter stumbled to his feet uncertainly.

"Of course. If there's anything I can do to help—"

Johnny Diamond, grinning, followed Potter and the cop out to the front door. He stood a moment, just inside, watching Potter and the cop get into a scout car. Then he turned to the sad-faced clerk.

"Did you sell a lavender doll to Donna Ray recently?"

"Yes." The clerk nodded stiffly. "It was one that came in the new shipment. Had a devil of a time finding what she wanted, because I had to go through a lot of boxes in the store room. That's why I remember it."

Diamond chuckled.

"Y'know, you're a great help," he said, and walked out.

JOHNNY DIAMOND spent most of the afternoon trying to unravel the tangled threads of the case at his office. For that purpose, Sharpy served well—standing at respectable attention in the desk top.

"Y'know, Sharpy," Diamond said once, "there's more to this lavender doll business than meets the eye. There must be a reason for the killer wanting it so bad. Also, Potter's mixed up in it some way, as the cigaret and the mud indicates. And it seems unusual that he should be married to the girl who will step into Donna's lush spot with Kane's band. I'm beginning to get a few hazy ideas, Sharpy. Meantime, guess I'll call up Mullin and see what the good sergeant has unearthed."

A minute later Sergeant Mullin answered the phone in his office.

"Hi, there, bloodhound," Diamond drawled. "What cooks on the Donna Ray kill?"

To his surprise, the remark didn't irritate Mullin. For once the stolid homicide dick seemed in excellent spirits.

"The case has been cracked," he announced triumphantly. It's cut and dried. We have our man—a guy named Neil Potter, owner of the Doll House."

"He confessed?"

"Naw, but he will. The guy smokes the same kind of fags we found in Donna Ray's room, and we found mud on his shoes that came from the alley below Donna's window. That ties it up nice and tight."

"But he didn't confess," said Diamond.

"So what? By the time our boys work him over, he'll spill. Looks like you come in second on this one, eh, Diamond?"

Diamond frowned into the phone.

"Yeah. Looks like I do."

He set the phone back in its cradle and stared at Sharpy, still silently attentive.

"Y'know, there's something wrong. Mullin is sure he can hang a murder rap on Potter. And maybe Potter is guilty—it looks that way. But there's one thing—just one thing—that doesn't fit. Come on, Sharpy, we're going to have to find out about it."

At eight o'clock that evening, Johnny Diamond dropped in at the Gold Room of the Carlton for dinner. Knowing the waiter got him a table near the bandstand. Kenny Kane and his band were playing sweet dinner music while couples swayed on the semidark floor.

Diamond dined slowly, letting the soft music relax him. After a couple numbers, Martha Lane sang. She was dressed in a tight-fitting black dress that made her curves look very exciting. Her voice was warm, with an intimate huskiness. Diamond couldn't help wondering what had ever induced her to marry old Neil Potter.

After the number, Martha Lane came down to Diamond's table. With her was Gottleib, the myopic-eyed press agent for the band.

Gottleib plopped down in a chair and Martha slithered into another. Gottleib blinked behind the thick spectacles.

"We noticed you sitting here, Diamond," he said. "Anything new on Donna's death?"

"There's been an arrest made," Diamond said easily.

This apparently was news to both

Gottleib and Martha Lane. Martha's green eyes widened.

"Whom did they arrest?"

Diamond turned to her with a slow, playful smile.

"Y'know, it's unusual that you, of all people, should ask that question," he said easily. "They arrested a man named Neil Potter. Your husband, I believe."

The girl stiffened suddenly, green eyes flashing.

"Neil!" she gasped. Then she leaned forward. "Yes, he's my husband, but we're getting a divorce. We never got along, but—he still isn't the type to commit murder. I don't understand—"

"I don't either," drawled Diamond. "Nevertheless, your hubby is in a spot." He told them about the mud and the foreign cigarets. "Did you know he smoked imported cigarets?"

Martha nodded slowly.

"Yes. But I didn't mention it when you found a cigaret in Donna's room. I—I was afraid." She flushed, then stumbled on. "But why would Neil kill Donna? He didn't even know her, except as a customer at his shop. What could be his motive?"

Diamond pushed back his chair, resting his hands on the table.

"I don't know exactly," he murmured. "Unless it would be something about a lavender doll."

He got up, then, smiled slowly. He read nothing in either Martha or Gottleib's face except puzzlement, and that disappointed him. He walked out of the Gold Room, while they stared after him.

FIFTEEN minutes later Johnny Diamond got out of his car in front of the Doll House. With a brisk step, he walked to the rear of the darkened building Diamond had decided on a course of action, and he knew where he was going. Things had begun to jell in Johnny Diamond's mind—and the way he figured it now, the answer to the whole sordid mess should be here at the Doll House.

He tried the door at the rear of the darkened building and found it locked, as he had expected. The shop was buttoned up for the night, which was just what Diamond wanted. That way, there would be no interruption during the search.

Picking up a rock, Diamond made short work of smashing in a window. Then, releasing the lock, he climbed through. A neat case of breaking and entering, Diamond thought, but worth the risk in this case.

He found himself in the store-room where boxes of unpacked dolls were piled. Diamond snapped on his flashlight and played it over the mound of boxes. It would be a tough, needle-in-the-haystack job. But if he found what he wanted, if he could find the lavender doll—

Diamond went to work rapidly, opening boxes, peering inside, and discarding them. For half an hour he worked sweating in the hot atmosphere of the room. But, finally, he was rewarded. Opening a doll box that looked like every other in the giant pile, he found the doll he was looking for.

It was an old grandma doll, dressed daintily in lavender and old lace!

Diamond looked at it thoughtfully, his heart pumping. Then, deftly, he held the doll in one hand and pulled at the head with the other. The head came off easily in his hand!

The rest was easy. Inserting his hand in the open neck of the doll, Diamond's groping fingers found what he wanted. He pulled his hand out, stared down into his palm.

He was holding a beautiful diamond necklace!

Diamond whistled softly at the sight. He didn't know the value of the necklace, but he could offer a close guess. If it was worth a buck, it was worth a hundred thousand. And that made sense out of a lot of things that hadn't made a particle of sense before.

Now he knew why the lavender doll had been so much in demand. Why one person had actually committed murder for it. One hundred thousand dollars in ice was a powerful motive!

Diamond crossed the room quickly, then, and entered Potter's office. Since it was night, he dialed Sergeant Lew Mullin's home. Mullin answered it in his usual irritable manner.

"Hello, gumshoe," Diamond greeted him. "Did you get Potter to confess yet?"

Mullin snarled into the phone.

"He's a tough baby. He won't talk—yet."

Diamond pushed his hat back and grinned in the darkness.

"Have you figured out his motive yet?" he asked.

"Hell, no!" Mullin's voice was anger-laden. "That's the only thing we haven't got on this Potter bird. If we knew the motive we could really put the screws to him."

Diamond chuckled into the mouthpiece.

"Always glad to help a friend," he said. "I happen to be holding the motive in my hand right this minute. How about meeting me at the Doll House in fifteen minutes?"

There was a hesitation, then:

"If this is a gag, Diamond—"

"It's no gag," said Diamond quickly. "Come on out."

WITHOUT waiting for an answer Johnny Diamond hung up the receiver. He laid the necklace down on Potter's desk and gazed at it with a certain amount of awe. Things made sense now. The reason for the theft of the doll, the reason for Donna's death, the reason for everything. Everything, except—

His thoughts crashed to a halt as harsh words came to him from the doorway of Potter's office. Words that drove into him like penetrating nails.

"You're covered, Diamond! Don't move! I'll relieve you of that ice you have!"

Diamond turned slowly, facing this new menace. The man stood just inside the office, gun leveled. A shaft of moonlight cut across his face from a window, and Diamond recognized him.

It was Kenny Kane, the band leader!

Kane motioned Diamond to one side with the gun, then faded over and picked up the necklace with his free hand. His handsome face was twisted in a smirk.

"Too bad I have to kill you, Diamond," he said coldly. "But obviously I can't let you run around with the knowledge that I have this necklace. Anything you have to say before you go?"

Diamond thought fast. It would be fifteen minutes before Mullin would arrive. That meant he would have to stall for time. He forced a lopsided grin to his face.

"I've a few words, Kane," he said slowly. "Like a jigsaw puzzle, everything falls in place after a time. I think I have Donna's death all figured out now."

"Really?" Kane smiled. "Tell me what you know."

"I was suspicious of Potter right along," Diamond said. "When I saw Nick Boroni, the thief, come out of the Doll House, I knew that Potter must have underworld connections. And I figured this way—that if Potter dealt with guys like Boroni, then he must be a *fence for stolen goods!* That's the only way it made sense—that Potter was acting as a fence for people like Boroni, and covering it up with this Doll House of his. Right so far?"

Kane nodded slightly.

"Yes. Potter was a fence for stolen jewelry. He took hot stuff off the hands of thieves, and disposed of it later at a high profit to himself. Incidentally, this necklace I have was smuggled in from Europe. It slipped by customs inside this lavender doll, and was delivered to Potter inside the doll."

Diamond's face split in a slanted grin.

"From there it's simple. Potter received delivery of the ice inside the doll, as you say. That was probably the way he received a lot of smuggled stuff—hence the Doll House camouflage. Something must have prevented him from hiding the ice right away, so he stuck the lavender doll, with the necklace inside, in a pile with a lot of other dolls—never dreaming that his clerk would pick it out from among the many and sell it."

(Continued on page 120)

INTRODUCING
JERRY JASPER
"DANCE of DEATH"
"HERE HE IS, FOLKS, A WEALTHY YOUNG-MAN-ABOUT-TOWN, WHO TURNS TO THE STUDY OF CRIME AS AN AVOCATION. LATE ONE AFTERNOON, HE RUNS INTO A GORGEOUS GAL WHOM HE USED TO ROMANCE...
HELLO, JERRY! WHY, I HAVEN'T SEEN YOU FOR AGES!
BABE DEERING! THIS IS INDEED A PLEASURE! YOU LOOK SWELL. COME ON AND HAVE A COCKTAIL AND TELL ME WHAT YOU'RE DOING.
WE HAVE A NEW ACT - LIBBY LANE IS MY PARTNER - WE OPEN TONIGHT AT THE "GOLDEN ROSE" CLUB.
FINE! I'LL CATCH THE SHOW.
WE DO AN APACHE ADAGIO DANCE ACT. I DRESS AS THE MAN -
BABY, YOU'LL HAVE TO DO A LOT OF DISGUISING!
1.

IT'S ALMOST TIME TO GET TO THE CLUB. COME ALONG.
SURE!
WAIT OUT HERE WHILE I GET INTO MY COSTUME.
OKAY, HONEY
LATER, BABE DEERING EMERGES...
SAY, THAT'S SOME COSTUME!
SURE, THIS IS AN ADAGIO NUMBER, AND I CAN'T WEAR TOO MUCH..
HERE COMES LIBBY LANE, MY PARTNER - THE JERK!
LOOKS TO ME LIKE YOU DON'T LOVE ME? TOO MUCH...
SHE MARRIED JIM LANE A GUY I LIKE VERY MUCH. SHE MAKES HIM MISERABLE.
I HEARD THAT, YOU DOUBLE-CROSSING HEEL!
AY-Y-I! LET GO OR I'LL KILL YOU!
HEY!

BREAK IT UP, GIRLS! SAVE YOUR ENERGY FOR YOUR DANCE.
-TO KEEP YOUR DIRTY HANDS OFF BABE!
OW!
LIBBY LANE'S HUSBAND, JIM, APPEARS ON THE SCENE...
YOU LOUSY BUM, I'LL TEACH YOU-
TAKING UP FOR BABE INSTEAD OF ME, EH? I'M ONLY YOUR WIFE, OF COURSE!
I WISH I WERE RID OF YOU FOR GOOD, YOU WITCH!

POOR JERRY! JIM DIDN'T REALIZE YOU WERE TRYING TO PROTECT ME.
HE'D BETTER GET OUT OF HERE BEFORE I TAKE HIM APART.
HEY, YOU TWO - HURRY AND GET SET FOR YOUR ENTRANCE - THE SHOW STARTS IN TEN MINUTES.
WHO'S THAT CHARACTER?
THAT'S LIBBY'S COUSIN, BEN STOKES, HE'S THE ORCHESTRA LEADER HERE. HE GOT US THE BOOKING.
OH YES, NOW I REMEMBER READING- HOW HE AND LIBBY JUST INHERITED A FORTUNE FROM THEIR LATE UNCLE.
THAT'S RIGHT. AND IT'S TOO GOOD FOR THE PEROXIDE PHONEY!
GUESS I'LL SQUAT HERE AND GET AN EYEFUL OF THE SHOW...
THE HUGE ROOM DARKENS - THE SPOTLIGHTS FLASH ON - AND AT A SIGNAL FROM THE LEADER, THE ORCHESTRA SOUNDS A CHORD...

AT THE ORCHESTRA'S BLARE, THE DANCE TEAM RUNS ONSTAGE . . .
THEY BEGIN THEIR ADAGIO ROUTINE . .
BEN STOKES BECOMES A PART OF THE ACT AS LIBBY DANCES UP AND . . .
. . . SIMULATES A FLIRTATION WITH THE ORCHESTRA LEADER . . .

BABE DEERING, IN THE PART OF THE JEALOUS LOVER, SPRINGS FORWARD...
...AND YANKS HER PARTNER AWAY...
...AND HURLS HER SWIFTLY ACROSS THE GLEAMING DANCE FLOOR -
BUT INSTEAD OF LEAPING UP AGAIN TO CONCLUDE THE DANCE, LIBBY LIES INERT...
SOMETHING'S WRONG WITH THAT LANE CHICK!

SHE'S DEAD! AND HERE'S A DEEP SCRATCH ON HER ARM!
SOMEBODY JABBED HER WITH FAST-ACTING POISON! IT'S MURDER!
ALL RIGHT, BABE, COME CLEAN! GIVE ME THE NEEDLE YOU USED.
BUT, JERRY, I DIDN'T - I DIDN'T K-KILL HER!
I'M GETTING OUT OF HERE -
OH, NO YOU DON'T! YOU'RE A SUSPECT!
YOU'RE STAYING RIGHT HERE, SISTER!
AII-EEK!
THE COPS SOON ARRIVE ON THE SCENE...

THIS DAME RUBBED THE BLONDE OUT. WE'LL TAKE HER DOWN TO HEADQUARTERS.
HOLD ON, SERGEANT.
SHE DIDN'T DO IT. THE GUILTY PARTY IS RIGHT HERE AMONG US. I JUST PICKED THE NEEDLE OFF HIM—
BEN STOKES FURTIVELY REACHES INTO HIS POCKET...
SO! I TRICKED YOU, KILLER! I FIGURED MY LIE WOULD MAKE YOU REACH FOR THE GENUINE NEEDLE!
UGH!
YOU POISONED YOUR COUSIN LIBBY WHILE SHE PRETENDED TO FLIRT WITH YOU. CONFESS, OR I'LL CRACK YOU AGAIN!
YOU'VE G-GOT ME, WISE GUY!
YOU WANTED TO INHERIT ALL YOUR LATE UNCLE'S MONEY, SO YOU CROAKED YOUR COUSIN. TAKE HIM AWAY, OFFICER. NOW HE'LL FRY IN THE ELECTRIC CHAIR.

WATCH FOR JERRY JASPER IN OUR NEXT BIG ISSUE

When a ruthless gang of crooks set out to steal an election, murder is not too high a price to pay. The old judge was on a red hot spot and it was up to Steve Bunch to tag the mysterious beauty who was the foil in this carefully planned frame.

MURDER ON THE BENCH

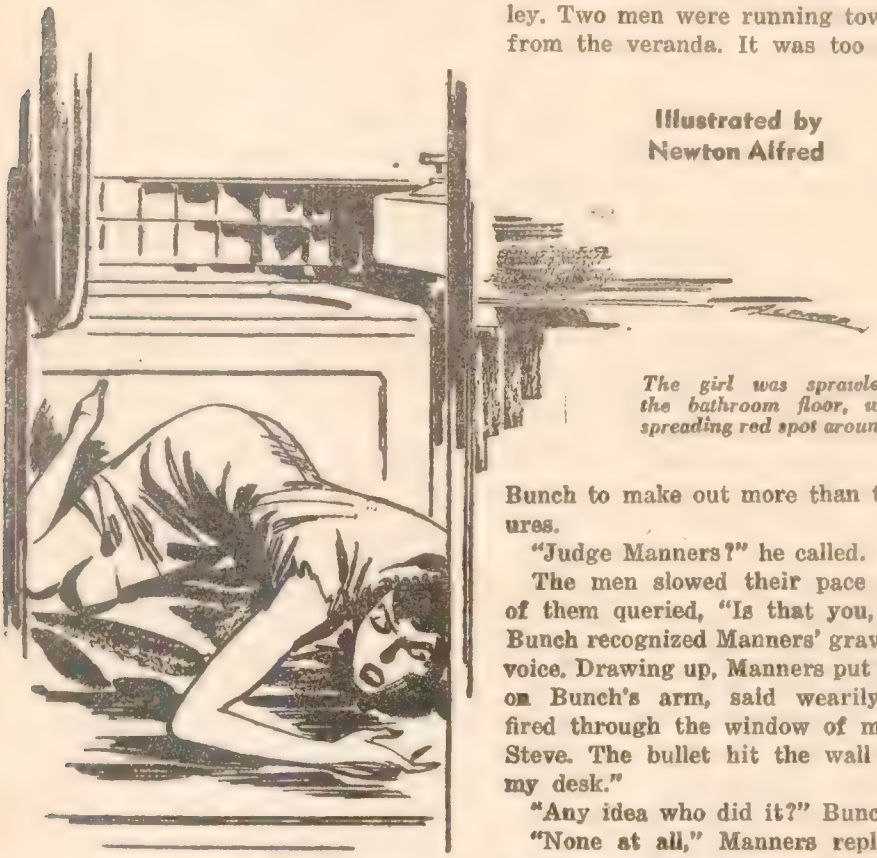
THE heavy dinner hour traffic fanned out at the end of the Fourteenth Street Bridge. Steve Bunch sighed impatiently, pushed the gas to the floor, snaking to the inside lane for time. Judge Peter Manners hadn't said what it was all about, but the undercurrent of anxiety in his grave voice told Bunch it was more than just talk and a game of chess this time. The old judge wasn't easily frightened.

Bunch cut the ignition and lights on his car, coasting to a stop in front of the old New England colonial. He watched it a minute, liking it as he always had, frowning as he ran his eye to a black Lincoln Continental sitting in the drive. Over the phone, Manners had sounded

By RAYMOND DRENNEN, JR.

strictly private, and this wasn't Manners' car.

The air was crisp, almost winter cold, and the night dark with low hanging black clouds. Bunch pondered, getting out of the car, then froze suddenly as the



The girl was sprawled on the bathroom floor, with a spreading red spot around her.

crack of a small caliber gun split the night air. He listened for an instant, decided the shot had come from in back of the judge's house. Swiftly he ran across the yard toward the back, staying in the shadows. He heard running footsteps inside the house and a door on the back veranda swing open.

Then he sighted the thin, black figure crossing the alley, disappearing beyond a row of tall poplar trees on the other side. Bunch heard the screen door slam behind him as he skimmed the lawn toward the alley. When he got through the poplars, he could see the gunman vaulting into a sedan that was already moving on the next street. It was too far, and the glow of lights too faint for Bunch to make out the color of the car or the make.

Puzzled, he came back across the alley. Two men were running toward him from the veranda. It was too dark for

Illustrated by Newton Alfred

Bunch to make out more than their figures.

"Judge Manners?" he called.

The men slowed their pace and one of them queried, "Is that you, Steve?" Bunch recognized Manners' grave, gentle voice. Drawing up, Manners put his hand on Bunch's arm, said wearily, "They fired through the window of my study, Steve. The bullet hit the wall back of my desk."

"Any idea who did it?" Bunch asked.

"None at all," Manners replied. The men were walking back to the veranda now. Hobbins, the judge's butler, turned on the light as they approached and Bunch got a look at the man with Manners. The judge said, "Halliday, this is Steve Bunch, a criminologist."

"Private eye," Bunch corrected drily, taking the hand Halliday held out. A little too promptly, Bunch thought, and it was clammy. Maybe from running.

Manners said, "Ed is a gun manufacturer, Steve. I suppose you'd call him an important voter."

"Good thing you came along, Bunch," Halliday exclaimed, then laughed ner-

vously, "unless you're the marksman. From the detective angle, you COULD be, you know."

"What for?" Bunch asked tonelessly.

"Joking, of course," he put in quickly, then hesitated. "The judge and I were sitting quietly in his study when the shot rang out without any warning whatsoever. Lucky, damn lucky! the gunman was such a poor shot. The judge was like a clay duck in his chair."

MANNERS went ahead of them into his study, Bunch following behind. Halliday was a big man, with heavy reddish eyebrows, little hair and a florid complexion. He was still puffing from the exercise and his expensive serge suit was ruffled. He said:

"Well, judge, I'll be going. Don't want to keep you and Bunch from your chess game, but I wish you'd think it over."

"I'll think about it, Ed," Manners promised.

Halliday turned to Bunch with mock grief, saying, "That's all he'll do, Bunch. Just think about it. All I want is an adjournment. See what you can do with him and I'll make it worth your while."

Perhaps it was the edge in his laugh, the unnatural strain for humor, but Bunch had the feeling that Halliday meant the offer.

Manners chuckled, walking to the door with Halliday. "Come out again, Ed. Hobbins will let you out."

The judge closed the door, walked slowly back to his desk and sat down. Bunch watched him for a moment, puzzled and angry at the tired, bewildered look in his friend's face. Any attempt to hurt Manners was something very personal with Bunch.

Turning, he examined the small hole in the window, sighting past the judge to where the slug had embedded itself in the plaster. He dug it out and had a look at it. It was a .22 caliber long rifle.

Manners watched him, breathed deeply, said, "Guess I'm lucky, Steve. I didn't realize when I telephoned you this afternoon that they'd go so far as to try to kill me."

"They didn't," Bunch said flatly. "The bullet missed you by a good three feet. You were a dead target for the gunman. If he'd wanted to hit you, he could have. Besides, they don't use .22 caliber rifles when they're out to murder someone."

"Hadn't thought about that," Manners murmured thoughtfully. "But, why. . ."

Bunch pulled the window blind down, swung a chair around by the desk. "Warning, probably. Do you want to tell me about it?"

The judge considered a few moments before he replied. He was a well-built man, but heavy, with a smooth face and iron gray hair that shaved ten years from his sixty-odd. He was a widower, lived alone in the house with Hobbins, the butler. A cleaning woman came in part time.

"I suppose it started with this girl," Manners said finally. "I've had three anonymous telephone calls in the last ten days, warning me to take a vacation, retire from the bench."

Bunch frowned. "You're a cinch for reelection next month. Were the calls from the girl?"

Manners shook his head. "Some man. A voice I never heard before. It was ten days ago that I first saw the girl. I'd recessed court for lunch and gone to my chambers. I was alone when she knocked and came in, then I remembered having seen her in court. She said her name was June Cochrane and she was impressed with the way I'd treated a case. She was a tall girl, a brunette, poised and stunning. I'd say she was in her late twenties."

"What was the case that impressed her?"

"Nothing unusual. A routine corporation suit." Manners closed his eyes speculatively. "I think she merely wanted to meet me, because she just congratulated me and left. Two days later, as I was leaving court and walking to my car, she caught up with me and asked if she could ride uptown. I dropped her on a

corner and didn't see her again until yesterday."

"She appear in court any more or call you?"

MANNERS shook his head. "Yesterday evening I was on my way to a banquet the bar association was having at the Coolridge Hotel. I was the main speaker and some of them were waiting for me in the lobby. I was about to enter the hotel and the girl was coming from the opposite direction. Neither of us saw the other, and we collided. The impact knocked us both to the sidewalk and somehow her foot twisted under me, wrenching her ankle. We brushed ourselves off and she asked me to help her up to her room. Seems she was registered at the Coolridge."

Bunch grinned sourly. "Your friends saw you walk her through the lobby, clinging to your arm, of course."

"It was a bad fall," Manners explained patiently. He drew the center drawer on his desk, took out a smoothed piece of writing paper. "Today I got this note from her through the mail."

Bunch took it, read:

"Dear Judge Manners. After your kindness last night, I think I should warn you so you won't be hurt. There are people against you, and if you'll come to my room at the Coolridge tonight at nine o'clock, I'll try to explain. I hope you'll understand that my life will be in danger if you do not regard this note in strict confidence. Sincerely, June Cochrane."

Bunch folded the note, handed it back. "There's no conscience in that, judge," he said quietly. "The accident, so-called, and the note are part of their plan. They want to get you to that room tonight at nine o'clock." He looked at his watch. "Forty-five minutes from now."

"But for what purpose, Steve?" Manners asked, bewildered. "I'm well fixed financially, but I don't have enough money to justify this elaborate scheme to entangle me. As for enemies . . . every judge has them, real or fancied, of course. I don't have any who would go to these lengths to embroil me in a scandal."

"Maybe not," Bunch agreed grimly, "but someone is warning you to get off the bench. Some personal scandal would probably prevent your reelection next month."

Judge Manners pushed a button behind the desk, asked Hobbins for highballs. Bunch pressed tobacco in his pipe and drew a match to it, reflecting that until now it had always been the judge who'd helped him. Manners had been a magistrate when Bunch first saw him. That was fifteen years ago, but he remembered it vividly, remembered how the judge had taken him to his chambers instead of sending him to a reform school. Then Bunch had gone to live with the judge and his wife, had finished high school and they'd helped him through college. It was a deep debt, Bunch knew, realizing what he might have turned out to be if it hadn't been for the old judge.

The drinks came and Manners looked at Bunch, asking,

"You'll come with me to see this girl?"

"I'll go see her for you," Bunch countered. "I don't think you should."

"We'll both go," Manners declared flatly. "I want to see if . . ."

Bunch snorted. "She's repenting? You're being sentimental." Then he added, "I don't like it, but I suppose you'll come anyway."

The judge drove his own car. Bunch watched him in his rear view mirror, wondering if Manners was really being sentimental, or smart in a cautious way. Bunch's experience told him the judge shouldn't have come, but he'd been adamant and Bunch'd had no alternative but to let him.

The parking lot on the alley next to the Coolridge Hotel was dark and unattended. There was plenty of space, and Bunch tooled in, waiting in front of his car for the judge to park beside him.

The only sounds came from the direction of the hostelry.

IT was five past nine when they left the elevator on the third floor. Brassy music and assorted party sounds floated up from the second floor ballroom. A group of delighted drunks with paper hats on approached them in the corridor, turned down the stairway. Bunch and Manners came to the end of the corridor, turned right to room 301. It was a corner room on the alley over the parking lot.

"This is where I brought her last night," Manners whispered.

Bunch knocked. There was a pause, then feet walked to the door on the other side. A girl's voice asked, "Who is it?"

"It's Judge Manners, Miss Cochrane."

"Are you alone?"

Manners hesitated, then seeing Bunch's nod, replied, "Yes, I'm alone."

"Just a moment." The feet went away, came back presently. Bunch stood away from the door, against the wall. The door opened a crack and the girl looked out. She was pale, with soft black hair hanging to her shoulders. Her eyes were wide, her mouth partially open. She didn't see Bunch. She said:

"Come in, please." Her voice was soft, strained slightly. She pulled the door wider, stepped back. Manners entered the room as Bunch, scowling, not liking the set-up, moved into the doorway back of him.

The girl was dressed in a negligee, standing back a few paces, her arms crossed on her breast. She was staring fixedly at Manners when she spotted Bunch. A scream of terror started low in her throat. She whirled and fled toward a door leading to an adjoining room.

It happened fast. Manners was standing clear of the door. Suddenly, someone behind it pulled it back, slammed it against Bunch. There was weight back of the slam. It threw Bunch off balance, along the inside wall of the room. A man jumped out from behind the door, a thin man with a gray face and a thin sneer on his mouth. There was a gun in his hand. He pointed it at Bunch, pulled the trigger.

Bunch heard the hammer snap on a blank. The man cursed, ran through the doorway, pulling it shut behind him. Bunch flung it open, shouting:

"Go after the girl, judge. I'll get the punk."

The thin man had a twenty-foot lead on Bunch. Bunch had his gun out, but he didn't use it, thinking he could catch him. Then it was too late. The man suddenly swerved against a door. He didn't stop to open it. It was ajar and he jumped inside, slammed it behind him. The spring lock caught, as Bunch came up. He tried the knob, put his shoulder to it. That's when he heard the shot.

It came from the girl's room, a sharp report above the noise of the brass floating up from the ballroom. Bunch whirled, ran back to 301. The door was still open and Bunch bounded in, headed for the door through which the girl had fled. He swung it open, found himself in a short hall adjoining the two rooms. Midway, a bathroom door was open. He glimpsed the girl, sprawled on the floor, her negligee falling away, her legs and arms branching grotesquely. There was a spreading red spot on the front of her negligee.

Judge Manners was standing over her, looking down with glassy eyes, not seeing her. There was a gun in his hand, a .38 automatic. He was weaving unsteadily, ignored Bunch.

Doubt flooded Bunch's mind and he thrust it away angrily. His mouth was suddenly thin and hard, his eyes slitted. He stepped into the bathroom, took Manners by the arm, pulling gently. The gun dropped to the floor from the judge's nerveless fingers. He shuddered, brought his head around to Bunch, working his mouth helplessly.

"Come on, judge," Bunch said quietly. "Let's get you out of here. Then I'll see what gives." He steered Manners into the bedroom. "I don't think anyone heard the shot. If they did, they won't pay any attention to it. The music was making a lot of racket."

THERE was a key to the room on the dresser, and Bunch picked it up, locking the door behind them. They didn't talk on the stairway to the lobby. Outside, Bunch guided the judge to the parking lot. The brisk night air seemed to bring him around a little. He murmured:

"I don't . . . understand, Steve . . ."

"I don't either," Bunch said grimly. "You get in your car, sit here until you think you can drive okay, then go on home. Take a drink and go to bed. I'm going to follow this through and I'll be out to see you in the morning."

"All right, boy," the judge mumbled.

Bunch took the stairway back to the third floor. Crazy questions were racing through his head as he put the key in the lock and opened the door. As he stepped in, something was trying desperately to tell him he shouldn't. Then, it suddenly surged through to his consciousness and he knew, but it was too late.

The blow exploded on the back of his head with the force of a thousand bombs. Brilliant fire flashed before his eyes, throwing him back, lifting him, then stifling and crushing him. . . .

He felt himself being carried, swaying to and fro, then rising and falling, as in a boat caught in smooth waves. A violent feeling of nausea was tearing at his stomach and he swallowed unconsciously, grinding his teeth. He swallowed hard, opened his eyes. The glow of lights on a dashboard sifted through to his brain.

He knew he was riding in a car, crowded in the middle. He turned his head, looked at the driver. Gradually, it penetrated to him that the driver was the thin, gray-faced man who'd tried to shoot him in the room. Bunch's fist knotted angrily, then he noticed his hands were tied in his lap, fastened to his belt.

A coarse, uneven voice on his right, cursed. The voice turned to a sneer. "Don't you lousy private eyes know when to stay home?"

Bunch's head was clearing now. He turned his eyes to the big, dark faced

A shrill cry of terror came from June Cochrane.

man on his right. He dropped them fractionally, noticed the gun in the man's right hand pointed at his stomach.

The man laughed hoarsely. "If you'd stayed out of it, no one would have been hurt. Old Manners had some enemies, but he had some friends, too. They were trying to help him. Now, we've got a stiff on our hands." He jabbed Bunch viciously in the stomach with the gun. "Dead girl to get rid of. She's in the back seat. We've got to unload her . . . just because you stick your nose in."

Bunch shuddered. It wasn't from what the man was saying. The wave of sickness was leaving. He ran his eye out the window to see blackness on either side, with lamp posts flashing by periodically. Then it occurred to him that the car they were riding in was Judge Manners' car.

"Where is he?" Bunch demanded fiercely. "Where's Manners?"

The big man laughed. "Asleep in your

car, back in the parking lot. We needed a sedan for this job, Bunch. We had to bring you along to keep you out of trouble. After we get rid of the stiff, we'll give you a little lecture about minding your own business." He cursed again, making clucking noises. "Such a fine broad, she was, too. Only she didn't know when to keep her nose clean. Maybe it's just as well, eh, Tip?"

THE thin man nodded, swerved the car suddenly in a sharp turn, braked down and cut the lights. Bunch was trying to orient himself when Tip braked again and eased into an alley. He coasted to a stop next to a row of poplars and Bunch suddenly realized they'd come to Judge Manners' house by a back road.

"This is it, Maxie," Tip said. His hand snaked under his coat, came out with an automatic which he held tightly on Bunch. "You take the girl and I'll handle the eye."

Maxie grunted, eased his bulk out of the front seat and opened the rear door. Bunch watched him drag out the body of June Cochrane, hoist it lightly over his shoulders.

"Friends, huh?" Bunch muttered sarcastically. "Planting the corpse on Manners."

The thin hood swung his rod, lashing across Bunch's face. Warm blood welled on his cheek as he dropped his head.

"Maybe now is the time," the hood gutted. Bunch felt him shifting in the seat, heard something tear. He raised his head to watch, felt the man's hand slap across his mouth, leaving a wide patch of adhesive tape. The man tore some more, plastered that on, growled, "That'll do it."

He got out of the car, reached in and pulled Bunch out after him. Bunch's legs were tied and the push sent him plunging full length onto the dark grass. He rolled over to a sitting position, saw a length of rubber hose in the thin man's hand. He watched him raise it slowly, saw it flash down, bend cruelly around his jaw and neck. Pain surged through his head and shoulders as the blow came again and again. He was aware vaguely of another hose in big Maxie's hand lashing out at him, crushing his breath, mutilating his underflesh.

Bunch had taken a beating like this one time, he remembered. Gang revenge. Cruel, sadistic, bestial, tearing the flesh and soul out of a living being. He hunched over, trying to protect his insides, catching the blows on his head, back and neck. His muscles failed to respond, failed to brace against the beating and he felt numb, his stomach relaxing. Then he felt himself slipping into eternity, not caring, laughing a little because it was over now. . . .

The sun was coming up. Bunch straightened, rolled on his side, heard the brittle snapping of dry bushes as his body pressed against them. He lay still for a long time, breathing deeply, looking at the sun and wondering why its rays didn't warn him. Gradually, he realized that someone had just told him the sun was coming up. It was his own rasping voice coming back to him.

He struggled to a sitting position, found his hands and feet still lashed together. He began fumbling with the knots, eventually got them loose. His throat felt like sandburs and his body throbbed dully like the inside of a boil, as he struggled to his feet, clawed his way up the bank to the road.

It was an old-surfaced macadam road, a desolate cross-way with tall dry grass on either side. The cold morning air sent painful shivers through him as he looked for landmarks. Then, gradually he made it out, a side road he'd been on once, a half mile off the parkway.

"Little Orphan Annie," he muttered inanely, "didn't have it this hard." Then he laughed giddily, knowing they'd dumped him here, thinking he was dead. His laugh changed to slow anger as realization came. Did they think he was dead? Tip and Maxie were careful boys and they knew their business. It was Manners they were after—not Bunch. A cold stiffness gripped his heart as he staggered down the road.

THE old judge had called on Bunch to help him, and Bunch had let him down. It was the old judge who might be laying in a country gutter now, with the cold stiffness that was in Bunch's heart creeping over him.

On the parkway, Bunch caught a ride into town on an oil truck.

"Large night, Chum?" the driver asked. He twisted his head, whistled softly. "You've been through it, chum. I go by a hospital. I'll drop you."

"Not at a hospital," Bunch growled. "Any place in town."

A taxi took him to his apartment, where he climbed into a shower and let the hot steam play on his neck and back. It brought out the soreness, began soothing and relaxing his muscles. But it didn't soothe the intense, sullen hate against Tip and Maxie, or the acute fear that he'd failed the judge in a vicious and senseless game of intimidation and death. If the judge was dead, Bunch told himself it wasn't his fault. But he couldn't escape the bitter feeling that if he'd handled it differently, there'd have been a different score now.

The telephone rang as he was dressing and he sucked his breath as he strode to answer it. He let it out like escaping steam when he recognized Judge Manner's grave, weary voice.

"I've been trying to get you all night, Steve. Are you all right?"

Bunch gave a wry grin. "Yeah, now," he muttered. "Where are you?"

"Home. Got here around four. They knocked me out right after you left me in my car and I didn't regain consciousness until after midnight."

"Where were you until four?" Bunch asked.

"I waited in front of your apartment until after three. I left your car there and came home in a taxi." Bunch could hear the judge breathing hard over the telephone. "Did you find out anything? What happened to . . ."

"June Cochrane? I don't know any more than I did before." He hesitated. "Is there anything you want to tell me?"

"I don't know what I can tell you. All I remember is some one hitting me over the head as I followed the girl into the other room."

Bunch frowned, visualizing what had happened. His voice was dry and flat when he asked the next question, hoping the judge could remove the doubt in his mind, dreading what would happen if he couldn't. "Do you remember going into the bathroom?"

"B a t h r o o m?" Manners repeated, puzzled.

Bunch breathed deep, relaxing. Then he snapped suddenly, "You didn't kill her then, judge. Have you found the body yet?"

"The body?" M a n n e r s whispered heavily. "I don't know what you're getting at, Steve."

"Search for it," Bunch ordered. "Start in the attic, go clear to the basement. Don't ask questions, but see if you can find the body of June Cochrane. They brought it out to your house last night. I'll be out later in the day and explain what happened. In the meantime, stay there and don't talk to anyone."

"All right, boy," Manners promised, bewildered.

Bunch had some eggs and coffee at the drug store on the corner, then drove to the Coolridge Hotel. He was angry and determined. Tip and Maxie, and whoever was back of them, had won the first round, but the game wasn't over. There was something, Bunch decided coolly, that was out of focus in this whole thing, and he thought he knew what it was. So far, they'd just been dealing cards, without naming the game. Except they wanted Manners to get off the bench. But why?

Manners had a long, clean record. He was a cinch for reelection, but if enough scandal were stirred up, and Manners stepped aside, then who would win? There was no other candidate strong enough to be sure of winning if Manners weren't in the race, so it didn't seem logical that one of them might be trying to force the judge's withdrawal. Unless,

Bunch thought, they were trying to force his retirement before election. What purpose could be served in that?

BUNCH strode through the lobby to the elevator, got off at the third floor and headed for the murder room. The door was unlocked and he scowled as he stepped in. A bunch of passkeys was lying on the dresser. A cart of linens and towels stood in the middle of the room and some dust rags were piled on the bare mattress. Bunch looked into the bathroom, found a clean white bathmat hanging over the edge of the tub. The maid had beaten him to the room.

Disappointed, he picked up the passkeys from the dresser, walked down the corridor to the door through which he'd chased Tip. It proved to be a single room, with an open window on the fire escape.

They'd carried the body down to the parking lot from here, he decided. They'd also carried Bunch down this way, after sapping him.

Bunch closed the door, returned the keys to the other room, then took the stairway to the lobby. A clerk at the desk told him June Cochrane had registered at four o'clock in the afternoon, two days ago. That would make it about three hours before she'd bumped into the judge on the sidewalk and he'd brought her up to her room. She'd had no luggage and had paid for three days in advance.

There was a message in her box. It said:

"Dear Helen, I'm sorry to have missed you, but I've decided to go out and see Judge Manners this evening. Love, June."

The message was time-stamped by the hotel at eight-thirty. Just thirty-five minutes, Bunch thought, before he and Manners entered June Cochrane's room.

Bunch walked to the telephone booth in the lobby, dialed Harry Gardner. "A job for you, Harry," he said. "I'm trying to spot a girl I've never seen and maybe you can do it for me."

Gardner was a free lance operative who worked on assignment for a couple of the bigger agencies and Bunch knew he was reliable. He said: "Will noon be all right, Steve? I'm just finishing a job."

"I'll wait," Bunch said, hating the delay, but figuring there wasn't much he could do about it. "Coolridge Hotel lobby."

Bunch bought a paper, sat down where he could keep an eye on Box 301. "Dear Helen," he muttered thoughtfully. What did she look like and who was she? She must know about the whole thing, or June Cochrane would have explained why she was going to see Manners. Either that, or she wouldn't have mentioned his name at all. But, why would she go see Manners, when she was expecting him to appear at her room? She didn't leave the note until eight-thirty and that wouldn't give her time to get out to the judge's house before he left to come to the hotel. She'd miss him on the way.

Thing that puzzled Bunch was that June Cochrane apparently hadn't even started for Manners' house. Then, why the note?

Harry Gardner walked into the lobby a little after twelve. He was a short, stocky man, with red hair and a quick, clear eye. Bunch explained the deal to him, describing Tip and Maxie.

"The main bait is this Helen," he said drily. "Tip and Maxie won't show, but if they do, take their tail and see who they operate for. Those boys need cutting down, Harry."

"They made a mistake," Gardner said, grinning.

"They couldn't have made a bigger one," Bunch muttered grimly. "I'm going to check the rogues gallery down at headquarters, then head out for Manners' house. Stay here until I contact you."

IT was after five when Bunch walked up the flagstones to Judge Manners' house. The thousands of pictures he'd studied at police headquarters hadn't given him a lead on Tip, or Maxie or June Cochrane, and he was in a sour frame of mind. Hobbins met him at the door, told him the judge was in his

study. Bunch asked:

"Where were you last night, Hobbins?"

"I was in the city, sir, attending a movie with my sister. It was my regular night out. I arrived home shortly after midnight."

Bunch frowned at him, walked on back to the study, wondering if Tip and Maxie had known that last night was Hobbins' regular night out. Manners looked up from his desk as Bunch entered.

"What did you mean about looking for the body?" he asked. His voice trembled a little. It was an effort for him to control it.

Bunch kicked a chair toward the desk, sat down heavily. He told the story, while Manners leaned forward tensely on the desk, his face pale. When Bunch finished, he whispered hoarsely:

"I don't remember being in the bathroom or seeing the body. All I remember is being knocked on the back of the head and pushed someplace. Someone was holding me up, told me to stand still or something like that. I remember vaguely being told to hold something."

Bunch nodded. "That would be the gun. You were standing right over the body when I came in. I guess you were out on your feet." He paused. "Have you searched the house as I asked?"

Manners nodded, his eyes arrowed in bewilderment. "We found nothing. Why should they bring the body here, then take it away?"

Bunch thought a minute. "I'm not sure," he murmured slowly. "But you can bet there was a reason. In the meantime, there's no body. We can't prove a crime has been committed. If we went to the police, they'd laugh at us. . . ."

Bunch paused as Hobbins entered, handed an envelope to the judge.

"It just arrived by special delivery, sir," he said.

Manners nodded and Hobbins left. It was a photo-mailer. Bunch watched the judge open it, slide something out. His face turned ashen and huge beads of sweat stood out on his forehead as he handed it to Bunch, whispering:

"Now we can prove a crime, Steve. It's a picture of my study. Taken at night, under flash bulbs. My desk . . . my chair . . . my books. . . ."

". . . and June Cochrane, lying in her negligee on the floor in front of your desk," Bunch finished, grim-faced. "That's why they brought the body here. To photograph it. Your friends who saw you with her in the hotel can witness that you knew her. A jury would say you killed her!" Bunch looked up, studied the judge carefully. "If you were wealthy," he said slowly, "This would be blackmail, pure and simple. But, you're not. They told you over the telephone to leave town. I'd rather have them scare you off than kill you!"

Manners' face was white. "Impossible," he said softly. "My court docket is full, but even if I could get away . . . I wouldn't let them frighten me off!" His last words were whispered, passionaare with conviction.

"If you don't, they'll send copies of this picture to the newspapers and the police. It'll block your reelection. I don't think they care about that, because they're moving too fast. They want you out of town immediately, and that means there's a case on your docket they don't want you to try."

MANNERS leaned back, sighed wearily. "I've thought about that. Thought about having you investigate them, but they're all straight routine." He paused, adding finally, "No, Steve, there's nothing on the docket to run me off, and I can't leave now. I've ordered a case to trial tomorrow and I've got to be here. I've already allowed several adjournments and I ruled against another one."

"Murder can over-rule you, judge," Bunch snapped. "What comes up tomorrow that can't be put off a month?"

Manners smiled patiently. "One corporation is suing another for patent infringement. They want to force the other side to stop manufacturing guns. They were licensed to do so during the war,

(Continued on page 122)

BLAST AND BE

WITHIN his cigar-and-magazine store, Terry West looked at his wrist-watch. It was nearing midnight.

Outside a January wind moaned and wailed through the deserted downtown streets of Crestwood. The frozen moon rode high; the stars were like fragments of ice. There would be no more customers at this hour, Terry West decided. He might as well close up shop for the night.

Yawning, he moved toward the front of his neat, well-kept store; turned out some of the lights as he went. He reached the front door; started to bolt it. Then—

What was that?

Again he heard the sound. It was the shriek of a siren. As Terry West listened, the siren's moan attained an ear-splitting wail. Its dissonant crescendo knifed through the night. A gong's mad clangor added to the din.

Terry West opened the front door of his store, peered out into the frozen darkness. A rocketing ambulance careened

Terry's revolver barked. Pock-face yelled an oath as the slug tore into his shoulder.

DAMNED!

By HENRY R. WYMAN

crazily past his vision.

He stared. At the middle of the block the ambulance began to slacken its breakneck pace. At the far corner it hesitated, paused under a sputtering arc-lamp. Something was hurled from the back of the vehicle; something small, dark, egg-shaped. The missile described an arching parabola toward the unlighted front of a closed cigar-store on the corner—the store which was Terry West's closest competitor.

As the missile was hurled, the ambulance lurched ahead. It gathered speed, vanished around the next corner on screaming tortured tires.

But before the machine's red-glowing tail-light had disappeared, that darkened cigar-store on the corner seemed to retch outward. Then it settled back with the slump of a slain cadaver. The night was sundered by a bellowing, roaring explosion. A blasting white light seared the darkness. Then, where the corner cigar-store's front had been, there was suddenly a hellish inferno of leaping flames.

THE thing had happened so abruptly that Terry was momentarily dazed. Now he gathered his wits, whirled, flung himself toward the rear of his own store. He snatched up his telephone, desperately rattled the receiver-hook.

"Fire department! Hurry! Emergency!" he snarled into the instrument.

He waited an instant. Then: "Fire department? There's been an explosion, corner of Grand and Main. A store's on fire. Got it? Okay."

He rang off, waited a second, rattled the receiver-hook again. "Police headquarters!" he barked.

Another pause. Then: "Police? A cigar-

It was either play with that mob—or be blown out of business. Leastwise, that was the way it was put on the line to Terry West. Terry thought he saw a third choice. But as he took it, a grinning skull loomed closer . . . .

store has been bombed at Grand and Main. Huh? You've already got the tip? I see." He hung up, mystified. How had the police learned of the bombing so quickly?

And now, outside, a dinning cacophony of wailing sirens and clanging bells, of blasting police-whistles and roaring motors, converged toward the focal point of the Grand and Main intersection. The streets, so lately deserted, were beginning to teem with excited people running, shouting—

Abruptly, the front door of Terry West's cigar-store opened. A cold blast of midnight air swept in. Terry looked up.

A woman had entered a girl, rather. She was a lush, maturely-developed brunette with dark eyes, crimson mouth and a worldly-wise expression. Through her expensive fur coat, Terry could see the full, enticing curves beneath.

She smiled at Terry. "Open late, aren't you?"

He nodded. "Just getting ready to close up when that blast let loose down the street. Is there something I can do for you?"

"Yes, I want to put down a bet on a policy number for tomorrow."

Terry shook his head. "Sorry. I don't handle number bets."

"You don't? Why not? There's money in it."

Terry shrugged. "Maybe. But I don't go for crooked rackets. Sure—if you happen to guess the correct first digits of tomorrow's bank clearings, you get paid off at six hundred to one. But the actual odds against you are mathematically much greater than that. The player has everything stacked against him."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. Besides, most of the people who play numbers can't afford it. Even kids play their pennies! It's a graft, a racket. It's an underworld enterprise, and I don't want any part of it."

"Scared of the law, mister?" the brunette girl drawled. "Because if you are, you needn't be. The cops are getting theirs. They won't interfere."

Terry stared at her. "You seem to know a lot about the graft," he said.

She laughed. "I do. I represent Spike Callahan and his mob—the ones that run the policy racket here in Crestwood. I'm offering you a chance to become our betting agent in this neighborhood. There's a nice piece of profit in it for you, mister—and other considerations, if you're interested."

AS SHE spoke, she leaned over the counter toward Terry; the front of her fur coat fell open slightly; and he saw that her frock was slashed deeply at the throat, offering glimpses of cream-smooth breasts. She grinned up at him: "Don't get me wrong, of course. I'm not interested in you. I'm Spike's girl. But I take care of several hotels that Spike owns. I know a lot of good-looking dames. They'll do anything I tell 'em . . ."

Terry West scowled. "Not interested."

"Maybe you'll change your mind when you know why your competitor down the street was bombed!" the woman snapped. "The guy was stubborn; refused to handle our number-bets for us. So we tossed a pineapple into his joint. Now—*it's your turn!*"

Terry stiffened. Now he understood why the police had already known of the explosion in his competitor's store: they were working hand in glove with Spike Callahan! Spike Callahan, ostensibly a wealthy contractor, but secretly Crestwood's political dictator and head of the vice and gambling rackets of the city!

He could expect no aid from the cops, Terry decided. He looked at the woman; sparred for time. "How long before I must decide?"

She smiled. "I'll be back here tomorrow night at midnight. I'll bring you all the necessary equipment—books, policy slips, receipts, and so on. And don't forget—if you play with us, you'll wear diamonds and have plenty of dames on the string . . . !"

Then she pulled her fur coat tightly about her lush figure and left the store.

Terry followed her; looked out into the night. At the far intersection, the

crowds were scattering. The fire apparatus was slipping away. A black, gaping orifice yawned where the cigar-store's front had been. The fire was out; nothing but charred wreckage remained.

Automatically, Terry locked his own place, switched out the lights, went out to his ancient, high-powered sedan. Under his breath, he cursed as he gunned his motor.

As he drove, Terry wondered if it would be worth his while to buck Callahan. There were three avenues open to him: he could knuckle under, become one of Callahan's agents in the racketeering policy game. Or he could refuse and have his store bombed out of existence. Or—

Or he could fight!

And Terry West, red-haired, grim-jawed, chose to fight!

AT DAWN the next morning, Terry arose and dressed. He went down to his sedan, drove out along a main highway leading away from Crestwood. Eventually he came to a little-used side-road. Once he had come this way on a Sunday drive; he knew exactly what he was looking for.

In another fifteen minutes he found it.

The place was an abandoned farmhouse, almost concealed from the narrow road because of the tangled weeds and neglected trees. Silent, wraithlike, the house loomed in the morning mists. There were no other houses in the immediate neighborhood; and the place was too far from railroad and main highway to attract tramps.

Terry West examined the place minutely; forced open the front door for a complete inspection of the interior. Satisfied at last, he nodded grimly to himself. The setup was perfect! He went outside again, fished in his pocket, produced a padlock. With the padlock he secured the front door of the farmhouse.

Then he drove back to Crestwood.

Promptly at midnight that next night, Terry was alone in his store. And on the stroke of twelve, his front door opened.

Terry looked up. He saw the brunette woman—Spike Callahan's woman—walking undulantly toward him. She carried a paper-wrapped package.

"Hello, mister," she smiled. "I brought your books and receipt pads. You'll start accepting number bets tomorrow."

Terry lifted his right fist from behind the counter. He had an automatic clenched in it. He said: "The hell you preach, baby!" and vaulted over the barrier.

The girl's dark eyes widened. Her features went pale beneath her make-up.

"Wh-what kind of game is this?" she rasped.

"Down on the floor!" Terry West grated. "Down flat—before I decide to put a slug through you!"

"Go to hell, you son of—"

Terry raised his left hand, slammed his palm across her face. She staggered backward, the marks of his fingers showing like crimson splotches on her cheek. And as she staggered, Terry leaped at her, tripped her, flung her to the floor.

He pinioned her with his weight; felt her writhing desperately to get free. She tried to sink her knee into his groin; the movement threw her skirt high up her gleaming legs.

Terry avoided the vicious thrust of her knee. From his pocket he extracted heavy cord. In a trice he had trussed her wrists, her kicking ankles. He shoved a gag into her mouth, secured it with more twine.

Then he scrambled to his feet.

Her coat had fallen open, her dress had fallen revealingly off one shoulder. Her skirt had moved high up on her; her parted thighs were white and smooth and shapely. And . . .

Terry grunted. "You ought to wear more clothes!" he said. Then he stooped over her. "I'm going to take you for a ride, baby."

FROM behind him a rasping voice said: "Oh, no you ain't, Wise Guy!"

Terry whirled—but he was too slow. An evil-faced, pock-marked thug stood grinning at him from the doorway of the store. Pockface had an automatic in his hand. He was aiming it at Terry's midsection. He said: "Drop your gat, fella.

And if you try anything funny, I'll let you have it!"

Terry cursed himself for a damned fool. He should have guessed that the dame would have someone with her—one of Spike Callahan's torpedoes!

His shoulders slumped. His automatic clattered to the floor. "Okay," he said dully.

"That's better!" Pock-face grinned. "Now kneel down and untie that dame."

Terry went to his knees alongside the squirming form of the moll. He fumbled at the knots he had tied at her wrists. He worked slowly; and meanwhile, his brain raced.

Suddenly he stiffened. In trussing the brunette girl he had not searched her for weapons. Now he thought of it. If only she carried a gun—!

Concealing his movements from Pock-face, he slipped his fingers into the girl's low-necked dress. She squirmed, tried to cry a warning through her gag; succeeded only in uttering a muffled, meaningless mumble. In the meantime, Terry's fingers felt around thoroughly inside her frock. Then he felt something cold, hard—

A small-caliber roscoe!

He snatched at it, drew it forth cautiously. Behind him he heard Pock-face saying: "Come on, mug—make it snappy!"

"All right," Terry answered. And then suddenly, he raised his red head. Like a flash, he whirled—and took quick aim at the pock-faced gorilla.

The torpedo roared an oath, fingered the trigger of his own automatic. The weapon belched fire, spat a singing slug past Terry's ear. At the same instant Terry cut loose. The tiny revolver barked, kicked up in his hand. Pock-face said: "Oh, God—!" and collapsed, clutching his shoulder.

Terry was at the man instantly. The torpedo wasn't dead; Terry's bullet had caught him in the shoulder, smashed a bone. Terry leaped up, doused the store's lights, locked the front door. Using a flashlight, he went to his first-aid kit and extracted gauze bandages, antiseptic. He dressed the wounded gangster's shoulder; realized he couldn't afford to leave the man there to tell what had happened.

Terry found another rope and gag; firmly fettered his second prisoner. Then he went out through the store's rear door.

The door opened upon a dark, deserted alley. Nobody was in sight. Terry West's ancient sedan was parked by the door.

Terry went back inside, picked up the wounded mobster, carried him out; dumped him into the sedan's tonneau. Then he returned, got the brunette moll, deposited her on the front seat. He leaped behind the wheel, kicked the starter. The motor coughed, roared powerfully. Terry clashed his gears, slammed his foot on the throttle. The machine leaped out of the alley, headed for the suburbs. . . .

AN HOUR later, Terry hauled his captives into that deserted farmhouse which he had located that same morning. The wounded gorilla was conscious now; his ratlike eyes glared with malevolence.

Terry laughed grimly. "You're both in a sweet spot now!" he crowed. "Callahan will think you pulled a run-out on him; will think you eloped He won't like the idea of his woman taking a powder with one of his rod-men. If he ever catches either of you, it'll be just too bad!"

The woman paled and moaned through her gag.

Terry went to the rusty stove at the other side of the room; scratched a match to the kindling in it. Soon a roaring fire had made the stove's rusty iron sides glow cherry-red. Into the blaze, Terry thrust a battered poker; waited until its end was white hot. Then he brought the glowing poker over to the gunsel.

Terry brought the hot poker close to the man's cringing face. He said: "You're going to tell me where Spike Callahan has his number-racket headquarters, or I'll mark you for life!"

He screamed through his gag. Terry unfastened the rag in the rat's mouth so that he could speak. "Come on—talk!" he grunted. He brought the glowing poker closer.

"I'll tell!" he yelped. "Callahan's policy-

racket is operated from a hangout over that old livery-stable behind the railroad yards back of Crestwood . . ."

"That's all I wanted to know!" Terry grunted. "Now I'll be able to get the goods on him, turn him over to the Federal authorities!" He dropped his hot poker, slipped the gag back into the man's mouth. Then, silently, he left the farmhouse; got into his sedan, and drove hell-for-leather back toward Crestwood.

At eight o'clock the next morning, Terry entered a tall downtown office-building. He was dressed in seedy clothes; had a battered cap pulled low over his eyes. He took the elevator to the tenth floor; went to an office marked: "P. C. Callahan, General Contractor."

This was the blind maintained by Spike Callahan, vice baron, the legitimate business with which he cloaked his other enterprises.

He found himself in an anteroom. A girl arose from behind a desk; came toward him She was young, yellow-haired, girlish. Her features were piquantly irregular, insouciantly pretty. Her simple frock delineated every lithe curve of her slender figure. She wore very little make-up; and there was something about her that made Terry's pulses leap. . . .

"Is there something I can do for you?" she asked.

"Yeah. I wanna see Spike."

Even as Terry spoke, a far door opened. A florid, beefy man peered into the anteroom. Terry recognized him. It was Spike Callahan himself.

Callahan said: "You lookin' for me?"

"Yeah. My name's Spider Rocco," Terry lied. "I tried to find you over to the livery stable by the railroad yards, but they said you wasn't there."

Callhan's eyes narrowed. "Come in—and don't talk so damned loud!" he grunted.

Terry walked past the yellow-haired girl; entered Callahan's private office. Callahan said: "Now, what's on your mind?"

"Nothin' much. I'm hot. I had to lam out of Chi last night on account of a bump-off. Just before I left, I run into a guy and a black-haired dame. They told me they used to work for you; the dame said she used to be your moll before she took a powder with this pock-marked torpedo. Well, as long as that gorilla walked out on you, I figured you might need a guy that's handy with a chopper. So here I am."

Callahan seemed to relax. "I get it. Well, Spider, maybe I can use you. But I don't ever talk that kind of business here, see? You come see me at my headquarters over the livery-stable tonight. Maybe I can give you a job on an ambulance, tossin' pineapples!"

Terry grinned secretly. He'd be able to collect plenty of evidence against Callahan—

He said: "Okay. What time shall I show up, boss?"

"Make it around eleven. Now scram."

Terry went out. He cast another look at the slender girl as he walked from the outer office. She was staring at him queerly. . . .

THE day seemed to drag interminably. When night came at last, he was back in his own apartment. Again and again he looked at his watch. Only eight o'clock! Three hours to wait before he started for Spike's headquarters!

Suddenly, Terry scowled. He had heard something. A soft tapping on his door. He slipped a hand into his pocket, grasped his automatic. Then he opened the door.

He drew a sharp breath. A girl was standing there. A young, slender, yellow-haired girl whose face was too blatantly rouged and powdered; whose dress was too tight, too garish, too revealing . . . it was the girl he had seen in Callahan's office that morning. Despite her heavy make-up, Terry recognized her.

But—had she recognized him? Did she know that he was the man who had given his name as Spider Rocco . . .?

Evidently she didn't tab him. Instead, she smiled brazenly and said: "Mr. Terry West?"

"Yes. What can I do for you?"

"—I came to talk to you," she said. She

walked into Terry's apartment, threw off her coat, sat down on the divan. Terry caught a flashing glimpse of smooth white skin. . . .

She drew a cigarette from a case, lighted it. She drew in a lungful of smoke. "I —I work for Spike Callahan," she said at last. "That's why I'm here. . . ."

Then Terry thought he understood. He remembered what that hard-looking moll had told him the night before, about dames.

So that was it! This girl had come here to flaunt herself; to persuade him to string along with the Callahan gang! To give him an idea of the reward he could have if he threw in with Callahan. . . .

SOMEHOW, Terry's heart sank as he studied the matter. For some reason, he had liked this blonde cutie ever since he had first seen her in Callahan's office that morning. She had seemed so wistful, so pure. And here she turned out to be just another one of Callahan's bims!

Well, what the hell? She would help pass away the hours until eleven o'clock, when he was due to meet Spike at the old livery-stable. . . .

"How about a drink, baby?" he grinned down at her.

"Sure." She stretched and yawned lazily.

He went into the kitchenette, mixed highballs. He returned; sat beside the girl, they drank. Tentatively he slipped an arm about her waist. She made no protest.

She cuddled against him. The perfume of her golden hair was in his nostrils, like heady wine. She said: "It's hot in here. Care if I make myself comfortable?"

Without waiting for an answer, she stood up, unstrapped the catches of her dress, shrugged it off over her curls. Terry's eyes widened in appreciation. She was lovely! She was wearing the gauziest of underthings and the firm curves of her small body were tantalizingly revealed. Her skin was flawless. . . .

"Like me?" she whispered.

"Guess, baby," Terry answered. He pulled her down beside him. . . .

Time, which had seemed so laggard, now fled by on fleeting wings of ecstasy. Terry crushed the girl against him, forced her to respond to his eager lips. Then he kissed the throbbing white hollow of her throat.

Lancing fires shot through his veins. He pulled her close . . . possessively close. He was wild with unleashed ardor.

But suddenly she fought him off; smacked her palm across his face. Her face was white beneath her make-up. "No!" she gasped. "I didn't come here for—for what you think. . . I only wanted to—"

INTERRUPTING her, there came the sound of a single chiming clock-stroke from the hallway of the apartment. Instinctively, Terry looked at his watch. Ten-thirty! He had only a half-hour to get to his rendezvous with Spike!

Torn between duty and the girl, he hesitated Then his jaw shot forward grimly. "Okay," he grated. "Get out!"

"No! Let me stay here—a while longer —only you must promise not to . . . bother me. . . ."

"Get out, I said!" He picked up her discarded dress, flung it at her. She stared at him with tear-misted eyes; seemed about to say something, then seemed to decide against it.

Silently she donned her frock, slipped into her coat. She left the apartment without a word.

Like lightning, Terry raced for his bedroom, put on his oldest clothes. He pulled a cap down over his face. Then he went out, climbed into his car, drove toward the railroad yards. . . .

PROMPTLY at eleven, Terry walked upstairs over the deserted livery-stable which was Spike's racket-headquarters. Callahan was waiting for him.

"Hello, Spider," the beefy man said. "Got a job for you. Get into this medical jacket. You gonna ride the back of an ambulance and toss an egg into a certain cigar store on Grand Street. Joint owned by a mug named West, who wouldn't listen to reason." And Callahan handed Ter-

ry two rough-surfaced objects the size of baseballs—ovoid, metallic, vicious-looking. Bombs!

Terry stifled a gasp. He was being commissioned to blow up his own store!

For the moment, the knowledge dazed him; made him see red. Then he got a grip on his emotions. He realized that with Callahan trusting him with the job of bombing his own store, the gang-leader could have no suspicion that he was an imposter. In other words, Callahan didn't suspect West's true identity. . . .

Terry grinned mirthlessly to himself. With his disguise unpenetrated, he would have a free hand to gather evidence against Callahan's racketeering activities. Evidence which he would present, not to the corrupt local police, but to the incorruptible G-men!

And even though he must bomb his own store—it was worth it!

Terry slipped the two pineapples into the pockets of the interne's jacket. Callahan led him downstairs. There was a dark ambulance waiting; Terry couldn't see the features of the man at the wheel—didn't have time. Spike was shoving Terry into the rear of the ambulance. The gang-leader said: "Hang onto the rear step. The driver'll tell you where to lay your eggs."

And then the ambulance lurched forward through the frigid darkness. Madly it gathered speed, careened crazily through the deserted streets with siren wailing, gong clanging.

Terry clung to the hand-hold as he stood on the rear step of the ambulance. Now they were speeding down Grand—

The machine swerved, slowed. Terry started outward; saw the front of his own cigar-store. He gritted his teeth. There was no way out.

Terry's free hand went to his coat-pocket, came out with a pineapple. He hurled it. "Let's go!" he yelled.

The ambulance catapulted onward. Back behind, there came a roaring detonation. The front of Terry's store vomited outward in seething flames!

Terry crawled inside the speeding, lurching fake ambulance. Abruptly, a dome-light snapped on over his head. He felt a gun-muzzle being jammed into his ribs. He stared—

Stared into the face of that pock-marked gorilla whom he had left tied up last night in the abandoned farmhouse!

THE torpedo grinned. "Well, smart guy, your number's up. You thought you left me all useless in that farm joint. But you dropped the hot poker, remember? So I rolled on it and burned my ropes through. I got back to Spike's headquarters and warned him about you."

Terry paled. "You mean—he knew who I was, all the time? And he deliberately made me blow up my own store?"

"Sure. And now you're goin' for a ride, wise apple!"

Terry's heart sank.

He stared out the back of the rocketing ambulance; saw that they were out of the city now. They were roaring along a country highway. The machine skidded, lurched into a side road.

The road leading to that farmhouse which Terry had used as a prison for Pock-face and the brunette moll last night.

Suddenly the ambulance screeched to a halt. In the darkness, Terry West was prodded up to the porch of the house. The front door opened. Terry was shoved inside. His eyes widened.

Spike Callahan was there in the room, surrounded by a dozen gorillas. The brunette moll was in a corner, her dark eyes flashing hate.

Callahan said: "Hello, sucker. So here you are at last, eh? Well, your jig's up, Terry West." He turned to some of his henchmen. "Rope him and toss him into the back room, boys, while we figure the best way to get rid of him."

In the back room, Terry fought at his fetters. It was useless; the knots were too well tied. Then, suddenly, out of the darkness, a whisper said: "Keep still, Terry!"

He stiffened. He felt warm, soft feminine hands fumbling at him. His nostrils caught a faint, remembered perfume—

(Continued on page 124)

HOMICIDE HORNS IN

By JOHN KANE

SHE glared at me from behind the office rail, and she meant the glare. Geraldine and I had been acquainted nearly three years, which gave her ample time to work up a good hate. She threw out her chest, the way a man would, and she jerked the horn-rims off her eyes, and she leaned over the rail

The note said: "Leave my man alone or you'll wish you had never been born!" Humphrey knew right then that it was serious. But what complicated matters was that a certain gal didn't know WHICH man to leave alone. All in all, the case was a honey!

Illustrated by
Al Savitt

Up came her gun and her eyes gleamed. "Good bye, push-over," she said.

with her fists clenched, her chin about three inches from mine.

"Humphrey," she roared, "when I tell you Mr. Corey is out, he's out to you! Are you trying to make me out a liar?"

Damn me, she was as big as a man, too, tall as I, but maybe a few pounds lighter. Roughly, Geraldine might have weighed one sixty, wringing wet. And though she hated me, looked down on me as the scum of the earth on account of my profession, I always had a tender spot in my heart for big dames. Big dames built like Geraldine, at least. Multiply the Blondell by one and a half and you see what I mean.

I opened the gate in the rail. "You act like a man," I sneered. "If that's what you want, I'll treat you like a man. Get out of the way, I aim to see Corey!"

So, I made a mistake. I put a hand

on her shoulder and pushed. About the time I was congratulating myself because what I was pushing was soft and slightly warm—from her actions a guy could have expected damned near anything!—the shoulder sort of slithered to one side. She stepped back. She jerked at her skirt like a man pulling up his trousers. If she'd have had time, she'd probably have spit on her hands. As it was, her left fist flew toward my chin. I grinned and rolled away, starting to say something smart, realized it was a feint too late and caught the right in the pit of the stomach.

I was still leaning against the gate trying to get my breath back when the door marked *City Manager* opened and Corey stuck his pretty face out. He said, "What's going on? Who—oh, it's Humphrey!" The smile which he wore as a dame wears lipsstick went away—like he'd wiped it off with cleansing tissue. "You," he growled, "are just the man I wanted to see. Come in, come in!"

I didn't even thumb my nose passing Geraldine. Her face was red and her lips compressed and sparks were coming out of her eyes as I went into the office.

LOUIS ROCCO, fat and brown, raised a hand in greeting to me. If we've got a political boss in our town, it's Louis Rocco. The other guy was Grimes Richmond, our most famous polo player. It didn't strike me as peculiar that they were there together—Rocco, representing a political grafter's ring, Richmond representing the Country Club. I was too keyed up.

Corey closed the door behind him. His mouth was so grim it looked as if his lips were in parentheses. I looked as tough as I was able to look. I said, "You backbiting good-for-nothing so and so!"

Rocco reached for his hat and dropped it. Grimes jumped up. Corey said, "Never mind, gentlemen, I can handle it. This has been coming for a long time." Then he went into his song and dance. He started in on my immediate family, with extra attention to my mother. In two minutes by the clock he had my great-great-great-grandmother right down in the gutter with the rest of the Humphreys.

"I can forgive anything," he snarled, "but a traitor! For three years you've done jobs for me, Humphrey. As city manager of this great city, I've hired you to make investigations for me I didn't care to trust to the regular channels! I thought I could trust you! And instead, you betrayed me! You've not only turned over the information you've uncovered for me, you've taken secrets of mine and peddled them to the highest bidder! But you're through, you rat!"

When he said *rat* I swung at him. I winked my left eye—the eye turned away from Richmond and Rocco before swinging. I missed him a foot. And he brought up his right—into my sore stomach! Before I could straighten up, Richmond had me by one arm while Rocco held the other. Richmond it was who jerked the Smith and Wesson from my shoulder holster. But it was Corey who said, "Let him loose!"

The rest was pretty sweet and fast. Once when we clinched, I remember whispering, "Easy, you fool!" But it didn't do any good. Even at that I kept my head. It was me that thought of the annunciator. The next time I caught his right—on my chin—I staggered back against the desk, tripped the switch pretending to catch my balance. In I went—what with me always earning my money—and ran my nose into his left. He swung his right and I blocked with my chin. The ceiling leaned down and slapped me on the back of the head. The floor felt pretty good between my shoulders, so I stayed there. Until Rocco washed my face, and thrust a bottle neck between my teeth.

I went out of the office like the villain in the play, only I didn't mention the mortgage on the old homestead. And Corey roared righteously after me. "You've been my right-hand man, Humphrey. My secrets have been your secrets, and you couldn't use your opportunities decently. From now on, stay away from me—for every time I see you I'll give you the same as you've gotten today!"

If I'd had a tail I'd have put it between my legs. At that Geraldine's tongue between her loose lips didn't help. Not when she blew on it.

DEEVER, of the *Star*, came in the washroom when I was bathing the shiner. The only thing he'd stopped for was a quick one at the bar—he smelled like a brewery, which same, considering we were at the Dutchman's, wasn't out of the way. He's a little squire, with a yellow face and a constant sneer. I should have pinched his brains out long ago.

He put his hands on his hips and leered and said, "Tch! tch! So the Beauteous Corey laid one on you and threw you out of the organization. I knew the day would come!"

Grudgingly I admitted it, and asked him what the hell he wanted.

He jerked out a pencil and an envelope and sneered, "I heard about it, ran into Rocco on the street, thought I'd be on the spot when you spilled your guts! Now, you got any statements? Anything to say about Corey?"

I dried my hands. "No statements, no gut-spilling. And if you have to quote me on Corey, just say he's one of the best city managers that money can buy!" So, Rocco had told him all about it. That made me feel good. Half the town should know by now that Corey smacked me around, me Smith and Wesson Humphrey, the toughest dick west of the Mississippy.

Quietly Deever put away the pencil and the envelope. He stopped sneering. "You never liked me, Humphrey, and I never liked you. But personal animosity shouldn't stop business."

I waited. I thought: Here's part of it, anyway! Part of what I took a beating for, part of my job, or the results of my job, anyway!

"I pay pretty well for information for my column, Humphrey. You ought to know something or other I could use. Corey being the Man Who, and you just stopping being Man Friday to the Man Who."

"Like for example?" I tried to look crafty—like Edward G. Robinson.

"Like for example," he said softly, "there's a big fat appropriation coming up in less than two weeks for a new municipal airfield. And another for the city stadium. It would be interesting to know where they will be located—definitely. Corey of course, due to his popularity, cracks the whip. He'll have the final say."

"Profitable," I sneered. "You underrate the worth of the know, mister. For example, if you knew, you could option a bit of land, couldn't you, and make a pile of jack! You just want to print this information, however, to look smart, don't you?"

"I'm a writer, not a real estate men! It's worth—well, the tip is worth five hundred to me, Humphrey!"

I laughed in his face. "Five hundred! When somebody may make five hundred thousand out of it! Whoever you work for, tell him to raise the ante!"

I walked out of the washroom and into the bar. The Dutchman himself was wiping it off. He tch-tched properly at the eye and I blurted out who did it. I even mentioned Corey's maternal ancestors and tried to look tough when I said I'd get even. But nobody shuddered. And by that time my Scotch was up and Rocco had come in. He looked at the eye sympathetically and tch-tched like the rest of them.

I said, "You're late. I been expecting you for ten minutes. What do you want?"

Louis Rocco never got to be a political boss by not knowing the score. He could throw the soft soap. He told me how sorry he was he'd held my arm, that afterward he wished he hadn't because he'd have liked to have seen me whip Corey half to death, the big hog. Which was to laugh. He pushed his way close to me, and whispered as if we were on the Rock. "Just to show you my feelings are in the right place, I slipped this in my pocket and brought it to you."

It was my Smith & Wesson Magnum. Before I took it, I said, "You rat, you probably knocked off somebody with it

and want me to take the rap." I thought he was going to cry. So I put the rod away and went over to the booth where he was so anxious to take me. I knew what was coming. It was worth, he said, about two grand to find out where Corey was going to put the studium and Municipal Airport. I was still sneering at him when I got the phone call. When I came back, he brought a brand new fifth of Scotch and a bowl of ice. I sneered, "You should have baked a cake. Give me a pencil." Hell, I had a pocketful of pencils. I wanted him to be sure and watch. I took a napkin and wrote like this:

Deever, Star, $500.00.
Rocco, $2000.00.
G. Richmond, $2500.00.

His eyes bugged out of his coffee-colored forehead. I laughed and said, "The bidding's still open, monkey. I'm expecting more customers any minute."

A Western Union boy came over and asked if I was Smith & Wesson Humphrey. I admitted it, signed, took the small package and gave the kid a dime. Right in front of Rocco I opened it. There were forty twenty dollar bills in it, and no note. I tucked it away, trying to keep from showing how burned up I was.

I wrote: "Mr. X—$800.00 in advance."

SOMEBODY at my elbow giggled, "Boy! Quite an auction! Did you ever figure how quick you ought to sell, Humphrey? Might be you got your dough in lead instead of gelt. Corey can be tough!"

It was that damned Deever. He slid in beside me, picked up the bottle, fixed himself a drink. His grin included Rocco. Rocco got up. He said, glaring at the loose-tongued newshawk, "I don't want to talk for publication. Get in touch with me, Humphrey, and make yourself some dough!"

Going out Rocco held the door open for forty-six million dollars worth of dame. One was Mrs. Grimes Richmond, as blond as her pal was brunette, pal being our own little Hulda. I say "our own" because the whole town thought they owned Hulda. She was a local gal who had made good in a big way. Started out singing with a little two by four orchestra and ended up as high as she could go. Took some dancing lessons and now she's as big a star in Buenos Aires and Rio and Mexico City as she is in New York. It wasn't queer, their coming into the Dutchman's, for, in spite of its name, the Dutchman's is the classiest cocktail joint in town. So in they came, dressed right up to the notch, grinning and smiling at everybody. They both raised a hand to me, and Hulda pretended to be shocked at my appearance.

She came over to our table, and the scent of that babe nearly floored me. She knitted her brows, and leaned over so far peering at me that Deever goggled like a goldfish when her fur swung aside and the coat of her suit parted, and—oh, hell, you've seen babes lean over tables.

She reached out with a red-tipped nail and touched my shiner. She said—you've guessed it—"Tch-tch!"

We laughed for a minute, me telling her how it happened, then she went to join Belle Richmond—Grimes' wife—and to be frank about it, her hips in that tight dress were an insult to men. She slid up on one of the Dutchman's chromium barstools knowing damned well how much silk and white skin was going to be flashed! I reached for the bottle.

Deever sighed. "If you had something like that babe has—!"

I glared. I don't like that sort of talk, and besides, I'd known Hulda for years. Deever shrugged. He, too, drank. I started to leave. But he dropped his voice and said, "Look, Humphrey, I'll do you a good turn. You know Corey has been going around with Hulda don't you?"

I nodded, standing up.

"That's just a blind. He's nuts about Belle Richmond and she feels the same way. If I wanted to get even with Corey, I'd sort of investigate I might get a bit of evidence, maybe a picture. Then I'd turn it over to Grimes Richmond. Never think that lad is soft! He'd kill

The next time, I caught his right — right on my chin.

Corey and his wife both! Is that worth anything to you?"

I told him it wasn't worth a damned thing—not to me, because I didn't play like that. I waved a hand good-by to everybody in the joint, went out and grabbed a cab. On the way home the cabbie said, "Humphrey, you in a jam?" I told him nothing big. "That Checker behind is following us," he said. And I just grinned. I figured it was just additional proof that our plan was working.

AT home I took a shower and waited until after five o'clock. Then I called a number. In a guttural voice I

said, "Please, I speaks to der city manager, *nein?*"

The switchboard operator made the connection. I asked Corey if he could talk. He said he was all alone, to go ahead.

Bitterly I squawked, "You dirty louse, it was supposed to be a grand, not eight hundred!" He giggled, said he'd owe me the other two hundred, and how was my eye. I said, "And you crossed me there! You was supposed to do it the easy way, not mark me up!" He said he merely wanted to make it look good. Then he asked me if we were getting any results. I told him Rocco and Deever had made a try for the information.

So, he said, "Fine, fine. Humphrey. Keep working, talk to both of them, get confidential. You see, I've got to find that leak. Both of them have had gravy before, and I want to know where they got it. I want to see you, but you know we have to be careful. You know where Hulda is staying, don't you?" I did, of course. "Well, I'm going there after her performance tonight. We're very good friends. I'll meet you there around midnight."

I couldn't help it. I liked Hulda, too. But I said, "Look, boss, I wouldn't get too confidential with a dame—not even Hulda. She might not mean to cross you, but babes ain't smart!"

"She's smart enough to know what would happen if she crossed me. I'm using her, everything's okay. Meet me there."

I hung up and fixed a drink. Corey has been city manager for three years. He's been damned good at it, he's handsome as a matinee idol, and the dames of this town are solid behind him—like Robert Gable. He's crooked, sure—aren't all politicians?—but he's sweet-crooked, if you see what I mean.

Now in the past, as he'd mentioned over the phone, several of the things he'd attempted to do had leaked out—via the city council—and not only did he lose gravy himself, but the city lost chances at various enterprises. This job of mine was supposed to be a way to check on that leak. Somebody in the know was spouting off. By apparently splitting with Corey, by squawking that I wanted to get even, the buyers of this valuable information might come to me. And in the spurious deal I'd find out just whom they'd bought from before.

No sooner had I hung up than the phone rang. Deever, the reporter, said, "Humphrey, I been thinking. If I could print that information, I could get me a big raise—say $20 a week, making a grand sum of $1,040 for the year. Suppose I pay you the grand and be satisfied with the forty?"

I hung up when the doorbell rang—and got the shock of my life. See, I was wearing my underwear and an old robe. And when I opened the door, it was Geraldine Martin, Corey's female secretary. She grinned and shouldered her way right on in, and though it was Geraldine, it wasn't Geraldine either. For example her glasses were gone and there was rouge on her cheeks and her hair had been waved. In spite of that, there was something a little funny about her make-up that I didn't quite get at the time. I didn't even bother with it! She'd discarded the flat heels and was sure enough as big as me, and she wore silk stockings! Also a silk sweater that was as form-fitting as anything a man could hope to see!

She said, "Hello, baby, do we have to be sore?" And across the room she went and plopped down in a chair and crossed her pretty long legs with a flourish that left practically nothing to the imagination. I told you I liked meat on my babies! I suppose I muttered something about getting dressed, but she laughed and said I looked cute like this! Me, Humphrey, old and hairy and bent. "I'd like a cigarette and I'd like a drink," she snapped. "Isn't that what you usually offer women who came to see you?"

What could I do? We had a couple of drinks. Maybe I got ambitious. Fixed like this she wasn't bad at all, at all. So I sat down close beside her and when my knee touched hers, she didn't move. she just grinned.

She said, "Why the fake fight, Humphrey? Sure I know it was faked. But why? Hell, you could take that blinkety blank, blank, blank apart with one hand." When she said that, her eyes were really throwing off sparks like an emery wheel.

I said softly, "You interest me, Geraldine. Why is he a blinkety blank, blank and another blank?"

"He's a crook," she spat viciously, "and you know it. You helped him pull some of the stuff. And he's a double-crosser!"

LOOK, I'm none of these psychiatrists you see around the country. But it looked a bit funny—Geraldine popping up all at once with a lot of civic virtue. There was something behind this! I said, "You used to like him pretty well, didn't you? He used to tell you everything!"

"That was before he fell for that damned strip tease dancer that calls herself Hulda! Now he tells me nothing!"

So *that* was it. She looked at me and smiled, and again it struck me how odd her make-up was! She laid a hand on my knee. She said, "Humphrey, we're not children. I can talk to you. I know you know about the location of those sites, don't you?"

I put my arm around her shoulders and said, "Maybe."

"I know a fellow," she went on, her eyes full of meaning, "that would pay plenty for that information. Can we do business?"

I kissed her. By Gad, it was like setting a match to a firecracker. Her lips parted and her arms went around me and she damned near choked me to death. I remember fighting loose and reaching for my Scotch and soda and getting a glimpse of her mouth, loose and inviting. Then I reached for her again.

AT THE door, a long while afterward, she kissed me. She whispered, "Don't cross me, Humphrey. Try your best!"

And after she went I felt like hell. I told her I'd try to find out those sites—I already knew them. And I tried to pump her about some of the other information that had leaked out. I thought maybe she'd been the leak. She was too clever—I didn't get a damned thing out of her in the line of information.

I was eating at the Alamo Inn when Deever came in. He pulled out a chair opposite me. I said, "Brother, you're haunting me and I hate it." He reached across and helped himself to a French fried potato and beamed.

"I aim to haunt you," he conceded. "Look." He tossed a picture across the table. The picture was divorce evidence in any man's court. It was my boss Corey, in a pair of slacks, sitting on a divan. There was a woman with him and the woman was kissing him—and doing a fine job of it. The evidence for divorce came in because she'd forgot to put a lot of her clothes on. The woman was Belle Richmond. Wife of Grimes Richmond!

"That," smirked Deever, "is what I was talking about. Personally I'm afraid to use it. I'm not big and tough. A guy like you could pop the whip on Corey. How'd you like to have it?"

I said, "I'm not interested in the louse's love life. However, he'll take you apart if he learns you took it."

"And Grimes Richmond will take him, Corey, apart if he learns the same thing! I'll trade you the picture and some information for the location of the stadium and the airport?"

"I'd have to hear the information first, Deever."

"Louis Rocco owns a hunk of the Alamo Land and Realty. Richmond is his front. Does that mean anything?"

Did it! It meant plenty! If Richmond and Rocco were really partners, each one of them was trying to cross the other! Each had made a separate bid for what I had! Or what they thought I had.

The waiter brought the phone and plugged it in. I said, "Hello. Who? Oh, Hulda! How are you, sweetheart?" So I listened for a minute, frowning at Deever, who was bending both ears my way. Then I said, "Okay, baby, I'll be there." And hung up.

Almost to himself. Deever said, "Hulda ought to be able to find out something." Then, to me, "Well, how about it, Mister?"

I signaled for my check, pushed the rest of the potatoes toward him. "Can't use it," I said, and went out with him glaring at me.

I killed a little time back at the Duchman's, thinking. The damned thing wasn't working out so well. Deever wanted information, so did Rocco, so did Richmond, and so did Geraldine! That didn't make much sense. And that Deever! He left a bad taste in my mouth. Digging into the boss's love life. And maybe I shuddered a little, thinking what Grimes Richmond would do if he saw that picture, thinking of the scandal that would break Corey as city manager. Taking the picture from the little reporter wouldn't have helped. He probably had the negative as well. And I figured he didn't have guts enough to use them anyway. And anyway again, Corey was about done. He was playing with dynamite, and it was time for me to look around. I'm no tin angel, I'm no saint. I even got to thinking about actually selling a little of that information, providing I could get it.

HULDA was dancing at the Municipal Auditorium. I waved at the old fellow on the stagedoor and went in like I owned the joint. There was a long passage, semi-dark, leading backstage. Before I made it, a guy busted out of the other end and came sailing along. His hard heels clacked like a snare drum on the concrete floor, his fists were clinched. I started to speak, saw the guy was red-faced and stony-eyed mad. He didn't even see me. The guy was Grimes Richmond!

I knocked on Hulda's door. She asked who it was, I told her, and finally got in. Her eyes were red. She'd been crying. She said, "Oh, Humphrey, what am I going to do?" Then she was sobbing on my chest. And me—I was trying to keep my mind ond her troubles instead of mine. Did you ever have a woman cry on your chest, one of the world's prettiest and best built women, and her wearing a theatrical costume that was little more than nothing at all? That was my trouble, too.

It finally came out. Grimes Richmond had been to see her. Grimes had found out about Corey, knew that Hulda just acted as a front, tried to make it look as if Corey came to see her, when in reality he was coming to see Belle Richmond, the damned fool!

Hulda rubbed cold cream beneath her eyes, tried to fix her hair in the glass. "He was awful," she shuddered. "He wants me to hold the affair over Corey's head and find out where the new city airport and city stadium are going to be located!"

"And if you don't?"

"He'll sue for divorce and name Corey!"

"Which is what to you?"

She turned and faced me. Her jaw set, and she said, "Don't get this wrong, don't get your mind down in the gutter. I love Belle Richmond myself, Humphrey as much as if she were my own sister. You can believe it or not, I'm trying to break up the business of her and Corey!"

I'll never understand dames, never! She went on, "It started innocently enough, through me, and I feel guilty. Corey isn't good enough for Belle! He's a dirty crook, he's woman-crazy, he's everything bad. Grimes has got his faults, but he's worth a dozen Corey's. Belle, however, is infatuated with the man! And if Grimes divorces her, he'll drive the little fool right into Corey's arms. And what will Corey do? He'll bow out gracefully. He's not the marrying kind!"

Which did make it a nasty mess, no fooling. This Richmond babe was all right, but she was flighty. Just the type to lose her head over a heel like my boss. Hulda was powdering herself frantically. She even pressed me into service to powder her back, for she was due on the stage very shortly. She said, "I've got half a notion to tell Corey tonight when he comes to meet Belle at my house, that

A pair of scissors were sticking right through his shoulder blades.

it's all over. Except that that would just drive the two of them to another meeting place! I don't know what to do!"

She wheeled. "Humphrey, why is the location of that stadium and airport so important? This is the second offer or threat I've had concerning it! A man named Rocco called me and offered me three thousand to find out from Corey."

"Did he know about Corey and Mrs. Richmond?"

She giggled. "No. He thought I was Corey's girl friend, or implied as much!"

So I explained why the sites were im-

portant, how a smart operator could get options on the land wanted and, when the city came around, hold it up for a good stiff price per acre. Stadiums and airports need lots of space.

The callboy stuck in his head and said, "Five minutes, Miss Hulda."

"You've got to beat it, Humphrey. But I almost forgot Here's what I wanted with you. Came by mail, addressed to the auditorium."

She handed me a typewritten note. It read, "Leave my man alone or you'll wish you had never been born!" There wasn't any signature. Which made it tough on Hulda. She played the field, usually. She didn't know which man to leave alone.

I said, "Hell, what am I supposed to do with this, honey?"

She looked puzzled. "I thought detectives could identify notes and typewriters?" What was the use of explaining to her how many typewriters there were in town? So, knowing I'd see her after midnight—what with me meeting Corey at her place—I kissed her good-by and beat it.

I got in the cab and told the driver, "When you come to the first red light, stay stopped until I come back to the cab, even if the light changes before I do get back. Wait right there!"

He stopped at Travis. So I went back three cars to the cab that had been following us and opened the door. I said, "As long as we're going the same places, we can split the cab fare."

So Deever got out and paid his and came with me. He had plenty of brass. It took me three hours to get him drunk. He was sleeping with his head on a table in a West End joint at eleven, when I set out for Hulda's apartment and my date.

WEST WOODLAWN, that block, at least, is a street of big apartment houses. We turned into it off Fredricksburg Road. Coasting down slowly—I wanted to see what cars were parked in front of Hulda's building—we saw a car pull out from directly before the Huckins Apartment, without lights. My cabbie swore, pulled clear to the curb as the guy took the whole street, still without lights but constantly picking up speed. He scraped our rear fender, pulled right, went up over the curb at about sixty and through a hedge, to crash against an ornamental fountain and come to a stop. The cabbie and I got there at the same time.

The cabbie said, "These damn' drunks!" He jerked open the front door, saying, "Listen, Barrymore!" And that was as far as he got. The driver rolled out of the front seat and sprawled on the lawn. He tried to get up, gave a sort of gurgling scream and fell on his face. But not before I saw who it was.

Grimes Richmond.

And not before I saw what had killed him. There was a pair of scissors sticking right through his belted gabardine between his shoulder blades. How he'd driven with them there I don't know.

The cabbie said, "Cripes!" He turned and was sick. For all the green grass around Richmond's mouth wasn't green any more. Blood ran like water out of a faucet and I knew those scissors had gotten a lung. I managed to tell the cabbie to get the cops, and he staggered off.

The first curiosity-car arrived. There were four of them, and a gang of people from the house where the car was wrecked in less time than it takes to tell. Then somebody said, "Humphrey? What is it?"

It was Corey. Of all the places he could have been, this was probably the worst. Hulda lived at the Huckins! I jumped up from Grimes Richmond and bullied Corey out of the crowd. I got him to his car and said, "Beat it! Before the cops get here! It's Richmond, Grimes Richmond, and it may mean hell in a basket for you. Go home and stay there till I call you!"

His face got pale. That was his conscience hurting him, you think? Hell no, he didn't have a conscience! He was thinking of his job, wondering if it was going to come out about him and Grimes Richmond's wife, Belle! He hadn't gotten around the corner when the cops

came. Prowl car first, then Homer Kilbane, Homicide.

Homer is no dummy. He decided Grimes had been killed somewhere in the neighborhood, in a house or apartment, as few people carry scissors around. Leaving the weapon in the wound had stopped some of the bleeding, he'd managed to get this far before he crashed. The point was, where had he been? Homer called for help and started about humpty-nine coppers ringing doorbells.

Kilbane pulled me aside, got my story, said, "You ain't been with your boss, Corey, then?"

I looked sore. "That guy ain't my boss no more!"

"Sez you," growled Kilbane, and I began doubting our little ruse. "Now look, this is between us, on account of I got a wife and four kids, I need my job. Did you know that Richmond and Corey had a terrible argument out at the Olmos early tonight, and Richmond beat hell out of Corey?"

I started to say there weren't any scars on Corey, and thought better of it. I meant to heek him out of it.

Kilbane went on, "I sent a lad to see Corey. He lives only about six blocks farther out, and three blocks over. Here he comes now."

The cop reported that Corey had been in bed, at least he wore pajamas, when he finally opened the door, and he didn't like being disturbed. I made a few more side remarks out loud and thought a hell of a lot more inside. Corey, my boss, had worked fast into those pajamas. The copper must have come while he was changing. Kilbane didn't ask me what I wanted in this neighborhood, and after a while I started for the street, hoping my cabbie was still around.

Somebody tootled a horn. Somebody called softly, "Humphrey! Oh, Humphrey!"

IT WAS Geraldine Martin, throwing open the door of her coupe. I got in. She asked me what had happened and I told her, trying to keep my eyes off the long length of silk leg gleaming in the dashlight. She was wearing evening clothes, and she said she'd been to see Hulda's performance at the Auditorium. As we pulled away I asked her if it was good. She laughed, nasty like and said, "Good Lousy! More like salami than Salome! Where do you want to go!"

Now, following a hunch, I asked her to take me to town where I'd left Deever passed out, and I even explained that Deever had been following me all evening. I even mentioned the snapshot that Deever had of Corey and a certain dame.

She slowed up. "Any you think maybe Deever had something to do with this? He offered the picture to you, so you could blackmail Corey, but where does Grimes Richmond fit—oh! Are you trying to tell me the picture was of Corey and Belle Richmond My gosh, I thought you meant Hulda!"

I had to grab the wheel. Never, never did I hear anyone laugh so hard! Tears ran down her face, her breast almost shook free of the evening gown. It was ten minutes before she could quit laughing. At last she said, "That louse Corey certainly played the field, didn't he Now where do you want to go?"

FIVE minutes later I came out of the joint where I'd left Deever. I was riding high, mixed up as hell. The bartender said Deever waited until I left, then got up and walked out sober as a judge. The lug had put one over on me! So I'd called the boss, and he swore and he damned that he'd never gotten to Hulda's apartment at all! That he was on his way there when he passed the accident. Hulda didn't answer her phone.

"Where to, Sherlock?"

I said, "Huckins Apartment, Geraldine. And don't spare the horses." And on the way I talked out loud. I had nothing to lose. I think better like that anyway. As we pulled up in front of the apartment, Geraldine said, "Let's see what kind of dick I am, Humphrey. Corey could have done it, because of the earlier trouble with Richmond, which Kilbane mentioned. The trouble must

have been over Mrs. Richmond. Right?"

I nodded.

"It could have been Deever, Maybe he played drunk. Maybe he went out to Hulda's to put the bee on Belle Richmond. Maybe Richmond himself came in, they fought, and Deever did it. For that matter, maybe Belle did it, caught there at Hulda's by her husband."

"Could be," I said, opening the door.

"Rocco," she added softly. "Maybe he made the necessary arrangements to get the stadium and airport sites, maybe he figured killing his partner would leave him all the profits. I don't mind telling you he offered me plenty to find those sites. He thought Corey talked to me confidentially still." There was bitterness in her voice.

I answered, "I'm going to Hulda's. In the meanwhile, see if you can contact Belle Richmond. The cops probably have her by now, but find out what her story is."

HULDA didn't answer her bell. I'm pretty good at a lock. In two minutes I was inside. I remember the clock downstairs read about 12:45. I called, Hulda?" No answer of course. The lights were on. Across the room was a cocktail table with three empty glasses on it. One of them had a half moon of lipstick. All of them had fingerprints. Could one of them have been Grimes Richmond's? A telephone caught my eye. The pad showed where a message had been written on it. I found the message in the wastebasket. It read: "Cannot come tonight. G has found out. B." That made sense. Grimes had found out, Belle couldn't come. A maid had taken the message and left it for Hulda. Simple. Then who'd been here, from the glasses and the size of the prints. Hulda herself and two men.

I went into the bedroom, or rather, toward the bedroom. For I stopped right at the door. I picked up a man's glove. It was initialed in the lining, "G. R." So I had my man placed, I knew where the guy had got the scissors! My hunch had been right. I turned on the bedroom light and hurried through to the bathroom and gagged and vomited. Hulda was on the bed. What was left of Hulda, at least.

Poor kid. Never did I see anything like Hulda. She was tied up, bound fast with four silk stockings. And her body was a criss cross welter of shallow scratches. Right in the center of her breast was the icepick that had snuffed out her life.

But it was her face that was screwy. The knife, or whatever the instrument was, hadn't touched it. But somebody had made her up like a clown. Somebody had smeared her face with clown white —there was a jar of it there. Hulda used it in a clown dance—they'd made big Negroid lips, they'd plugged one nostril with cotton to give her a crooked nose. One eyebrow had been jerked out, a hair at a time. And scissors had cut that lustrous black hair like a dull lawnmower!

"Look, I'm forty-five years old, I've been a Homicide dick all my life, and I never saw anything like that." I backed off, muttering, talking to myself. I remember saying, "Damn him, damn him to hell, whoever he is, and I'll have him nailed to the cross with those glasses! Hulda's prints on one, two men's prints on the other."

I'm not sure I finished the remark. For I never made the living room. Something hit me. There wasn't a bunch of stars of a blinding light. Just a hell of a plunk on the head and then blackness.

I HEARD a voice say, "He's snapping out of it." Then a bottle at my lips, something soft and yielding under my head. I opened my eyes and stared up at Geraldine. She was hunkered down on the floor holding me and Homer Kilbane was there and the room was full of cops.

Kilbane said, "Well, well, Little Boy Murder! Miss Martin came back up to see what was keeping you and found out it was Morpheus. Have a nice nap Awake enough to talk?"

I was. Plenty. I finished up, "So evidently I walked in on a killer and didn't know it. He busted me on the head and scrammed. But the glasses will con—" I gestured toward the cocktail table. "Hey, who took those glasses" But all my raving didn't help, the glasses were gone!

They all sort of treated me as if I were an injured child that had to be humored. Geraldine had spilled her guts. There was a pickup out for Deever. Kilbane wanted to see that picture. He'd seen Mrs. Richmond and she'd gone off into hysterics, couldn't be questioned until morning.

Out in the kitchen, Kilbane said, "Look, Humphrey, if you're trying to cover up for your boss, don't. Headquarters got a call just before this one. It was anonymous, of course, but it said Corey scrammed away from the scene of the accident down on Woodlawn, after talking to you."

Stubbornly I said, "Listen, if Corey did this, I'd like to hang him as much as you would."

"Even drawing his money?" I started to smack him. He went on, "Hulda died close to midnight. Doc says those scratches on her were made with scissors, maybe the same pair that killed Grimes Richmond. He was here, you know. Your glass story don't make sense. You know we know Corey is home right now. You're trying to figure we'll think the killer was still in the apartment. But a killer wouldn't have punctured Richmond and let him get away while he worked on the babe with the same pair of scissors. Hell, the scissors were in Richmond! Come on, Humphrey, don't hold out!"

"You can go to hell," I said stiffly. "If Corey did this, I'll lynch him myself. He was on Woodlawn, baby. I sent him away. You heard Geraldine's story. He was carrying on with Mrs. Richmond all right, but you better he quiet if you like to eat. I sent him away to keep him out of a bad light, that's all. Now I'm going to get Geraldine to drive me home!"

WE DIDN'T talk much on the way home. She wanted to come in. Geraldine sort of liked me, I flatter myself. I told her it was two o'clock and to go on home. I undressed slowly. Corey. Deever. Rocco. Could Richmond have tortured Hulda himself, and the other guy, whoever he was, could he have stuck the scissors in Richmond, then? And what the hell happened to those glasses?

My clothes needed pressing, so I took everything out of them and laid the stuff on the table. I ran across the letter Hulda had received from somebody and read it again. "Leave my man alone or you'll wish you'd never been born." I looked at it for a long while, then I crawled back into my clothes. Dressed, I called a number.

"Hello," came the answer.

"Geraldine? Humphrey speaking, honey. Suppose you came over to my place for a while? I can't sleep and I've changed my mind!" She giggled. She said something about not being dressed and I said that would be all the better. I told her the key would be under the mat and if I wasn't there I was out looking for a liquor store at that time of night.

She said, "All right, snookie-ookie."

I hate 'em when they use baby talk!

I WAS gone maybe forty-five minutes. My door was unlocked when I got back. She was wearing a negligee, and she looked swell—what I saw of her. She came and took the liquor out of my hands and put her arms around my neck and pressed herself against me and kissed the hell out of me. After a while we had a drink. Then another one.

She patted my shoulder and said, "Humphrey, you know you've got to keep me informed of what's going on. After all, I'm with you, body and soul, and you know I'm interested." She kissed me again.

I said, "Baby, I see now why you never wear lipstick! It would melt and run." So we had another drink.

She said, "You got any theories at

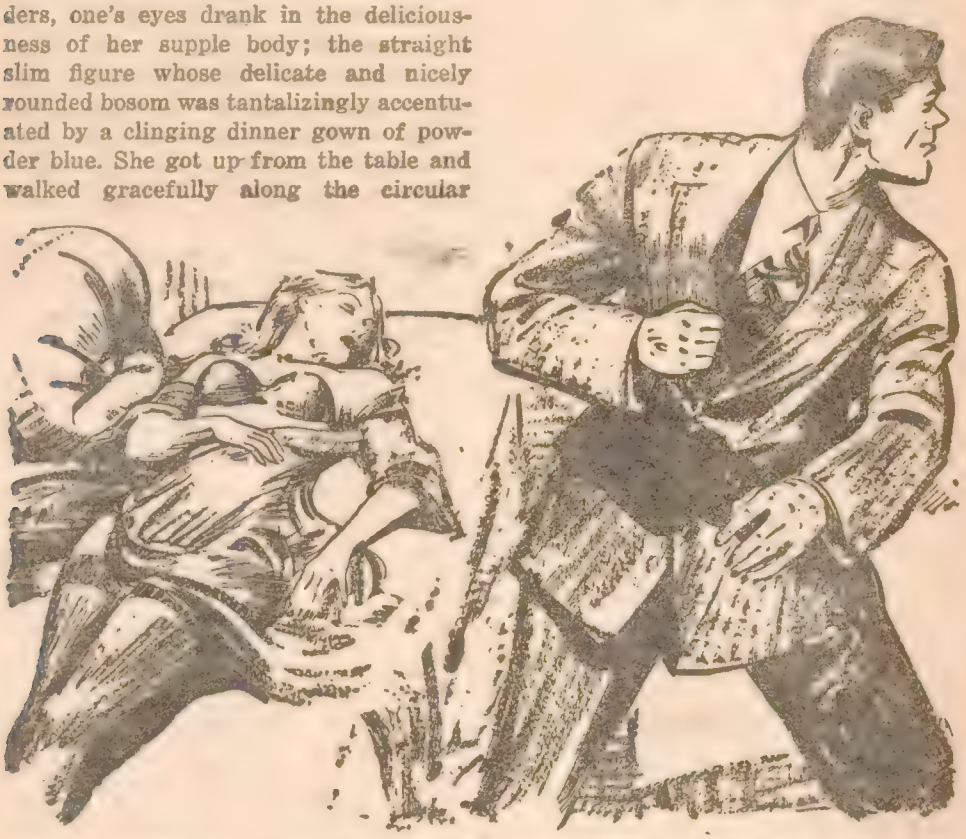
(Continued on page 127)

REDHEADS SPELL

He was a hard-boiled dick, this private eye, but there was something about a certain redhead that made him stick his chin out almost too far. It might have been curtains, but for the timely interference of an equally attractive brunette.

Illustrated by R. Morton

SHE was tall and dusty-red haired and lovely. From round slim calves to beautiful white shoulders, one's eyes drank in the deliciousness of her supple body; the straight slim figure whose delicate and nicely rounded bosom was tantalizingly accentuated by a clinging dinner gown of powder blue. She got up from the table and walked gracefully along the circular



balcony which was two steps above the polished dance floor. She was headed toward the powder room just off the foyer of the Tit-Tat-Toe Night Club.

The filly sitting with me chirps: "Say, Master Mind, I'm hungry!"

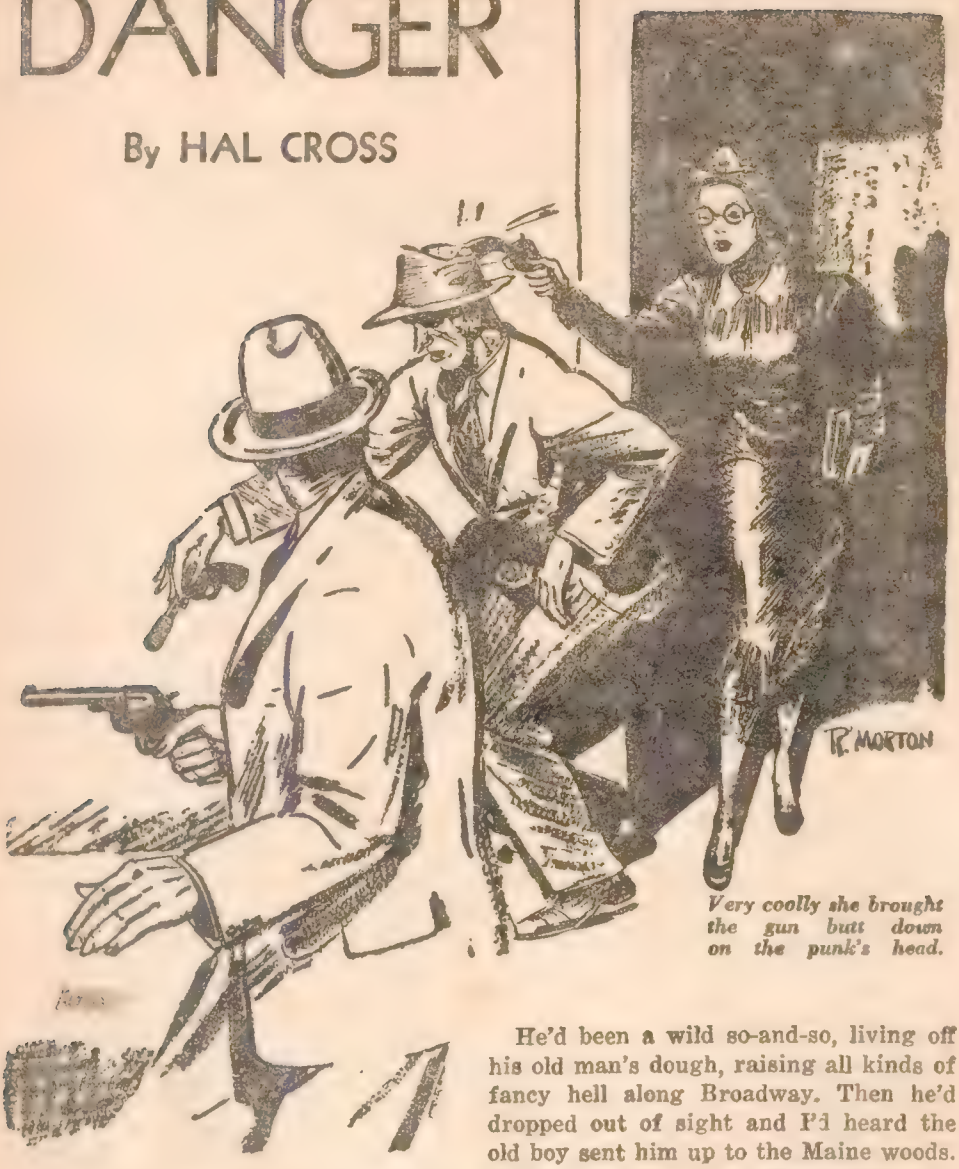
Isn't it hell? Before you can ever get to first base with a blonde, you've got to feed 'em. I sighed, turned back to my partner, Mabel, and said: "Shoot the works, kid. It's going to be—"

"What?" the blonde filly cooes. She's no mean eyeful herself, maybe just a little plump, but padded in the right places. It's my first night free in a month and I just made the date an hour ago. Things already looked promising. But take this red-head, now, who I'd just spotted at another table. You see, I'd been out with her once—two, three years ago.

Mabel says, "I asked, what?"

DANGER

By HAL CROSS



Very coolly she brought the gun butt down on the punk's head.

"Oh!" I said, snapping out of it. "A long winter, kid. Eat and drink up."

A poker-faced waiter comes up and Mabel starts reading off the menu as though she was a train announcer calling off station stops. I manage to get in, "A ham and rye and another whisky sour," and turned back to watch for that willowy redhead. My eyes strayed to the guy she'd been sitting with. And I came to my feet. Larry Thompson, and we hadn't seen each other in ten years.

He'd been a wild so-and-so, living off his old man's dough, raising all kinds of fancy hell along Broadway. Then he'd dropped out of sight and I'd heard the old boy sent him up to the Maine woods. Many a quart we had killed together.

I said quickly to the blonde, "Back in a moment, honey," and hard-heeled across the room. The tall, redhead was still outside.

Larry had spotted me about the same time I saw him. He was standing up, grinning from ear to ear. I could understand why the red-head went for him; he was dark and handsome, still in his thirties and trimly lean. He said:

"Rackets! You old so-an-so!"

MY eyebrows raised at the firm grip of his hand. I noted the alert, cool look in his smiling eyes. There was no trace of the old worldly-weary, tired Larry here. The boy was alive, keen. He continued:

"Since when can a dick attached to the D. A.'s office afford plenty-priced places like the Tit-Tat? Thought they had you guys on starvation wages, Ken?"

I nodded my brick top. "They still do. But now it's 'Daly and Jones, Investigators'. You ought to meet the other half of the partnership some time. She's homely as hell." I grinned. Every one *thought* my sidekick, Hannah, was homely; they didn't know what I did.

Larry exclaimed, "Like hell! Anytime Rackets Daly picks 'em without everything, it'll be—"

The waiter came up and Larry ordered me a drink. I was surprised when he took ginger ale. I was wondering what the hell had brought about the change in him during the years since I had seen him. We were just getting down to reminiscing of old gals and old times when I saw his alert gaze slip over my shoulder, evidently centering upon some one entering the dining room. I saw the frown creep across his brow.

Then, abruptly, he had tugged at my arm and was saying quietly: "Here, Daly—take this! Under the table. If anything should ever happen to me, open it and deliver it to—" He broke off, forming his lips into an expression that called for silence.

What the hell! I wondered what had struck the guy. The stiff envelope which he had passed beneath the table was in my hand and I slipped it inside my coat pocket before I turned.

The breath-taking red-head was just approaching the table. We stood up and Larry was smiling again as he introduced us. When he said, "Miss Mary Lee Williams," I remembered when it was we had met. But she was smart. She didn't flicker a single eyelash and she murmured, "Please to meet you, Mister Daly."

You could have knocked me over with a crowbar. The dame knew me all right. In her blue-green eyes was an expression of remembrance, of something else.

Larry didn't sit down again. He said suddenly, "Sorry, old man. We have to be going. I'll give your office a buzz soon—"

I said, "Sure," and wondered what in hell was eating the fellow. He was worried-looking again and anxious as the devil to get out of here. Something had come over him real sudden-like, and I couldn't figure it out.

They started out and Mary Lee, the red-head, says over her shoulder, "Good-by" in a way that sent electric thrills crowding up and down my spine. There was a look in her eyes that said nice, very nice memories had been recalled to her by meeting me again.

I went back to the table and found Mabel ankle-deep in food. How that kid liked to put on the nose-bag. It's a wonder she kept her nice shape. But then, anyone with the vitality and vivacity she had *couldn't* put on weight.

I TRIED to finish the sandwich, but I got to thinking about friend Larry and that envelope which is now burning a hole through my pocket. *"If anything should ever happen to me—"*

The fat, oily-looking bird who stops by our table has a gardenia in his lapel and smells like "Pirot's—for Dandruff." He's got a fat face, is smoking a fat cigar, and his round eyes are too close together. He warbles:

"Evening, Daly. I hope you and your partner"—he gives Mabel a leering look which practically takes the clothes right off her—"are enjoying yourselves?"

Mabel comes up out of a steak long enough to smile and I said: "We were, thanks."

Pete Costello, owner of the Tit-Tat-Toe, gives me a nasty look, clamps his thick mouth around the cigar and moves to another table. I don't like that heel's guts. When I'd been in the D. A.'s office, his name had been on my suspect list for a long time. But I'd never been able to

pin any of the rackets on him. Maybe I was too conscientious.

Mabel wipes her pretty lips with the corner of a napkin, comments: "Umm. I feel better, darling." She gave me a look out of baby-blue eyes which says, "I'm ready to go places now and do things." I'm big-hearted that way; I always feed 'em first.

But right now, all of a sudden, I'm jittery as hell. It's been maybe a couple of minutes since Larry Thompson started out of the place and I'm still thinking about that letter and what he had said And that expression on his face as he had stared over my shoulder. I said to Mabel:

"Come on, babe. We're shoving off."

She wondered what all the rush was about as I hurried her out of Costello's fancy joint. But I wasn't making any explanations; I had just decided that maybe I'd follow Larry. Just for the hell of it. It was one of those crazy hunches which I always get when my feet hurt. Why? Don't ask me, but something always happens when they do.

I hit the sidewalk with Mabel tagging along, and hailed a cab driver. I knew quite a few of them. To the thin, hungry-looking one which I picked out, I said hurriedly: "A slender, good-looking guy and a tall, nifty red-head, fella. Remember them? They just came out—"

He starts nodding and a glum look spreads over his face. "Yeah," he says gloomily. "They started to take this hack, then changed their minds and started walking. They just left." He twisted around in the street and started pointing back along the street. "They ought to be only about a block away—"

I heard the shot.

It was a single resounding bark in the stillness of this rather quiet, shadowy side street. The Tit-Tat-Toe Club was in a fairly exclusive neighborhood.

I whirled, and a full block away saw the car parked near the curb. With the exception of three cabs here, the street was empty of other cars. There was a parking garage down the street in the other direction. Then came the scream.

It started on a high note, rose higher until it became such a thin screech that it faded out. It was a girl's scream and it was fraught with terror. I saw some one moving on the sidewalk down there by that parked car. It looked like some one struggling with other figures.

In one motion, I whirled Mabel toward the cab; yelled: "You wait here, babe." I got my number twelve brogans in action and forgot about my burning feet. I was pushing my two hundred pounds down the street fast and got out my roscoe as I went.

I SAW the filly struggling with the two men as I ran up to the parked sedan. And something else. A still, twisted figure on the sidewalk.

The dame was the red-headed wren who had been with Larry. And neither of the birds struggling with her was my friend. That meant the man on the sidewalk was—Larry!

The two bruisers going to work on the red-head broke away from her, jumped me at the same time. There was no chance to use the .45. What the hell! There was the swirl of Mary Lee Williams' evening gown as she twisted free. The flaring skirt whirled upward, for a brief moment exposing the startling whiteness of slim legs. She was right in my way.

I started to shift the gun, to use the butt. Then those birds hit me.

"I'm no Little Lord Fauntleroy and it takes plenty to shove me around. But these two heavies must have been something imported from a lumber camp. They must have weighed two-fifty each and knew how to use their dukes. I rapped out with the gun butt, planning to carve up at least one ugly puss. Well, I didn't.

It felt like the Empire State Building had moved over against me and an air hammer had gone hog-wild on my freckled pan. For each jab I got at a leering, twisted face, I got three in return. And they were all stingerees. This Irish pan of mine is bad enough, but those two birds sure were adding some

highlights. I got sore then.

I sent over a burning, sizzling right that took one of the hard-jawed thugs right off his toes. I heard his teeth rattle and he went banging into a fender of the sedan parked at the curb behind him.

In the same moment, I got a glimpse of Mary Lee Williams doing a fast one toward one of the cabs which had edged up from the night-club. Those hack drivers were taking no chances; two cabs had rolled up and the drivers were just staring wide-eyed at the battle. I guess they didn't like the noise of hard fists bouncing off harder jaws.

I saw a cab door open and, round, slim calves leg it for the rear compartment. For just a moment, I took in the swell picture. Then my observations were cut short quite rudely.

This other bruiser maybe didn't appreciate girl beauty and he closed in fast during the breath of time when I glanced toward the dame. This time he didn't use his fists. His sap caught me just over the temple and I went down like an express elevator passing all floors. Dimly, I heard the sedan starting up. There was shouting and cursing, and in my head a boiler factory had started operations in full swing. I passed out.

WHEN I snapped out of it, I found myself seated on the running board of a police radio car and a doctor from an ambulance was waving smelling salts beneath my Roman nose. I felt strips of adhesive on my face and some one said:

"You sure must have given some one hell, Daly. But where are they?" The speaker was a burly flatfoot I recalled meeting several times. His name was Hennesey. I wavered to my feet and grabbed his massive arm. I looked around for the form which had been on the sidewalk, asked Hennesey about it.

"Gone to the morgue," her-faced Hennesey answered. "A bullet blew out the back of his skull. Any skunk who shoots from behind oughta be—"

Quickly, I told Hennesey about Larry, and how he had suddenly acted worried in the Tit-Tat-Toe Club. I didn't mention the envelope in my pocket. I said: "Larry had some sort of hunch about what was going to happen, Hennesey. I could see it in his eyes." Suddenly, I remembered the Williams red-head and how she had done a fadeout away from this place. I had an idea.

Briefly, I told the flattie about the two thugs. I didn't mention the dame. If this had been any other killing, I would have. But the rub-out of Larry was something real personal and I figured maybe I could get faster results than the cops.

I got away from there and headed for a cab parked a little way along the curb. The driver had been standing outside the circle of bulls and he leaped after me, exclaiming, "Say, Mister Daly, your girl friend has been waiting in my hack for you. She's all upset and bawling—"

I saw her.

She came out of the rear seat, clutching my coat, blabbering, "I think you're terrible, Rackets. You take me out for a date and then you get mixed up in a murder and forget all about me. I thought we were going to go places and do things—"

She edged her soft little form close up against me. She was still sobbing a little and the warmth of her there in my arms, trembling a little as she stopped crying caused a very pleasant sensation to run through my veins. But I snapped out of it, remembering Larry. I got a bunch of keys from my hip pocket.

"Look, Mabel," I said, real personal-like, "go up to the office and stick around. There's some rye in the clothes closet. I'll be back later."

I gave her a quick kiss and pushed her back in the cab. The driver was grinning. I snapped, "Relax, guy!" and handed him two bucks. "Get going." I gave him my office address and ducked before the wren could pile out after me again. What is this thing that attracts blondes, red-heads, brunettes, and off-colors to a six-foot-two red-headed shamus like me?

I HOPPED another hack and started to give the address of the tall, willowy red-head who had been with Larry; and then I recalled that I'd forgotten her address! You see, this Williams frail had come to our office once and asked us to clamp down on a rat who was trying to shake her down about some off-color pictures. It seems she poses for artists, and some heel had got hold of some prints of her in the all-together. He'd threatened to sell them if she didn't buy the negatives.

The fat heel who stopped at our table was on the D.A.'s suspect list.

It's just another of the dirty rackets worked in this town and I'd got the guy and messed him up plenty. It's only one of the crooked rackets I've busted up. The guy's doing time in Ossining now and the red-head went for me in a big way. That's how I happened to know her. And now I've forgotten the address. Imagine!

I said to the driver, "Around the corner and find the first drug store you can."

FROM a 'phone, I called Hannah. In case you don't know, Hannah's the other half of the agency. She's tall, dark and got a shape that would make Venus weep with envy. She dresses in somber black and looks like an old maid. Around the office she wears tortoise-shell glasses and her jet-black hair combed straight

back. It's an act, brother.

Hannah knows plenty and everybody. I could never get along without her. But I'd been playing hookey tonight, seeing as how she went home with a bad headache and didn't feel like going for a buggy ride.

She answered the call in a sleepy voice, and as soon as she knows it's me says, "Listen, Rackets, if you think you're coming up here at this hour of the night—"

I laughed, "At ease, Beautiful. Right now, I've got other things to do." Quickly, I told her about Larry's murder and the Williams girl, asking "What's her address partner? You're good at remembering those things."

It took Hannah only a moment to remember it. It was a small, exclusive apartment building up Lexington Avenue. Right away Hannah's nose for crime gets itchy and she wants to meet me. But I had different ideas. I finished with, "See you in the morning, Sherlock," and hung up. She was cussing hell out of me in that biting, keen-minded way of hers.

I went back to the cab and gave the driver the dame's address. We made plenty fast time uptown.

I got to thinking about her and about that moment just before she had come back to Larry's table. He had looked past my shoulder, slipping me that envelope at the same time. What was it he hadn't wanted her to see? And why had she taken such a fast run-out powder back there at the murder scene? Was there any connection between her and those two bruisers who had gone to work on me—?

The cab driver announced, "Here it is, boss," just as I thought of that long envelope in my pocket. We were easing up to the curb. I was taking out Larry's packet when I spotted the wedge-shouldered guy standing near the red-head's apartment. And I recalled that the thug who had knocked me cold had scrammed, taking his partner with him. My fingers started working fast as I glanced around the inside of the cab.

Then I climbed out, slipped the driver a ten-spot and directed. "No more fares for you, get it? Know my office address?"

The hackie grins, "Sure thing. Who doesn't, Rackets? You got a rep around this town—"

I said, "Yeah, what kind?" I jabbed my finger at his chest. "Now you make yourself scarce for the next couple hours, then meet me outside my office. Got it?"

"Sure thing," says he and rolls off down the street. I turned toward the apartment to get a squint at this bird I'd been standing in a nearby doorway. He was gone.

It's about two a.m. and I'm wondering how I'm going to get inside this private apartment building without a key. I pushed the red-head's buzzer and there was no answer. But I had a hunch she was home and not wanting to see me.

Just then a darky porter comes out the doorway, holding the door open while he drags out a mop pail and stuff from inside. He was bending down and it was lucky he didn't see my patched-up mug. I jangled an extra set of keys I had with me, pretending I was just going to open the door. I said. "Here, let me hold it for you," then ducked inside. I reached the fourth floor—where the red-head's apartment was—and knocked softly on the door. I said: "Telegram, Miss Williams."

She fell for it.

THE door opened and I had a pleasant glimpse of lacy underthings and a softly rounded bosom which was hidden by the smoke-thin negligee partly wrapped around her creamy shoulders. A light behind her brought out the golden tints of her dusty red hair.

She gasped, started to slam the door. But I did a fast one across the threshold, pressed my shoulders against the panel, and locked it behind me. I put the key in my pocket. She stamped a pretty foot and said, "Oh!"

I grinned, took a quick step forward and swept her tall, vibrant form into my arms. I asked: "Is this the way to treat an old friend, Mary Lee?"

She was young and lovely and utterly

breath-taking. Her blue-green eyes made me think of lazy hot days on the beach at Bermuda. I kissed her, and the tenseness slowly went out of her, and she nestled against me supple and warm, returning my kisses with growing ardor. Presently she said: "But I can't forget that you're a detective, Ken Daly. I know you're ruthless when you get on a case, and I have nothing to do with—with Larry's murder. I just got scared."

Mention of his name snapped me out of it then. I pushed her away from me, thought it was the hardest thing I ever did. I growled: "Like hell, sweetness. You know something about Larry and you're holding out. Why had he cut out the liquor and what was he afraid of?" I shoved my rough jaw close to her face and demanded, "Now, give!"

She whirled away from me, stumbled toward a door across the richly furnished living room. She stood in the doorway, back pressed against the woodwork and slender hands open against her pink cheeks. She cried out:

"Please go away and leave me alone. I tell you I don't know a thing about it." She was cringing a little and looked soft and helpless—she knew how!—and for a moment I felt sorry for her.

But then I saw the expression in the depth of her eyes and it made me mad as hell to think that a beautiful dame like her was holding out information.

"Larry was one of the best friends I ever had," I rapped out. "And tonight, just before you came back to his table, he looked over my shoulder at you and he was worried about something. Something he didn't want you to know about. Now start talking, sister—"

With a quick, strong movement, she twisted out of my grip and darted into the bedroom. She started to slam the door in my face and it caught me right on the chin—where there was a strip of adhesive. Stars rocketed through my skull. That jaw was as tender as hell.

I DIVED after her across the room. There was a single, soft-glowing bridge lamp turned on and the tingling smell of cherry-blossom perfume. And the intimate fragrance of a woman's personal belongings. But they didn't mean a thing.

My hand clapped down on Mary Lee's shoulder as she tried to skirt around a thick sofa. Fingers digging into her warm flash, I spun her around. Her small hands lashed out at my face.

Open-handed, I slapped her. Hard. She sat down on the sofa real sudden-like and she bounced up again, sobbing, "I hate you—"

I let her have it again, harder this time. Right on the cheek. It slapped her off balance, rolling her over on the sofa, face downward. On a sudden impulse, I let her have a dozen fast smacks. She writhed and twisted furiously and I had to dodge the wild kicking of her little spiked heels, but I held her shoulders down firmly with my left hand and continued slapping hard with my right.

Then, abruptly, she stopped fighting to get free and went limp. She just lay there quivering and sobbing, face buried in a cushion, her body jerking spasmodically with each racking sob. I sat down beside her and waited quietly.

After a while she stopped crying, squirmed around slowly and sat up. The expression in her tear-shining eyes made me feel like a louse. A big tear hung suspended on her long eyelash for a moment, then tumbled down to her quivering red lips. She said: "Rackets, you must believe me. Larry *was* worried about something. But it was nothing connected with me." Her voice dropped to a trembling whisper. "We—we were going to be married."

I felt terrible. I gathered her into my arms, got her pretty red head down on my shoulder and kissed her warm neck. I murmured, "Dammit, kiddo, I'm sorry as hell." I knew she was telling the truth.

I had been using the wrong tactics. Or had I? Suddenly she was cuddling against me and her hand crept up and softly stroked my cheek. Just that feathery touch sent a pleasant shock through my pounding veins. Maybe some dames

like a guy who slaps them around, or perhaps she was remembering that date of ours, two, three years ago. Anyway, *this* was no act!

Warm lips found my own and they spoke a story which no words could have expressed. Between her parted lips, Mary Lee's fragrant breath was a caress against my mouth.

Presently Mary Lee murmured: "I think there's one thing I can tell you—now, Rackets."

I snapped out of it. "Huh?"

She laughed at me then, pointing at my face. "You're all lipstick, darling. What I was going to say is: Larry was a government man—a G-Man. He was working undercover; carrying no credentials whatsoever."

I came back to earth fast then, jumping up and standing facing her. "What?" I exploded.

She nodded somberly. "It's true. No one knew. He entered the government service two years ago. That's why he never drank any more. He took his job almost religiously. He—"

Suddenly, I was getting ideas. I was recalling a case I had been on recently. Along with some sleuthing on this particular job, I'd run into a name that didn't tie in with my own case at all. But I'd been curious as hell at the time. I guess I was looking mean and almost staring right through the red-head, for she suddenly shivered and exclaimed:

"Good gosh, Rackets. What is it? Don't stare at me like that!" She came up on her feet, the negligee making a little silken rustle about her long legs. She clutched my arm. "What—?"

Then I saw how dumb I'd been. "Look," I prodded. "When you left Larry's table at the night club, you went out to the powder room. Just as you started back in, Larry looked toward you and got worried as hell about something. I took it for granted he was looking at you. But was there anyone else with you? Anyone speaking to you just before you came back into the dining room?"

Quickly, she said: "Certainly. There was Fay Murray, an entertainer there; and—"

She mentioned the name and I went taut. I started to reach for my coat, directing, "Get into your street clothes. I think I see the whole set-up now. I've got a date with a cab driver in half an hour and then this murder is going to be solved, honey!"

FROM the doorway, the ugly-faced gorilla snarls: "Who said so, dick?"

I knew he was the bird who had knocked me cold back near Larry Thompson's corpse. This time I could see that his swarthy skin was pock-marked and unshaved. He had peculiar gray eyes and the roscoe in his mitt was a .45. My own fingers were still inches away from my coat. I had dropped my own gat in a side pocket when the two had jumped me back by the night club. I had been afraid to use it then, because Mary Lee had been in the way.

The girl let out a terrified little scream.

"Scar-face" snarls: "Shut up, you. Or maybe you want your teeth knocked down your throat!"

I was edged forward on the balls of my feet when the other guy steps in the bedroom doorway. It wasn't the one I had knocked cold earlier this evening. Maybe that one was still out. This one's skinny and dark gimlet-eyed; all hopped up on snow, I knew. But it was the silencer screwed on the end of his gat which sent a chill down my spine. These birds certainly meant no fooling.

"So you got it all solved?" the big pock-marked brute leers. "Now ain't that swell? Too bad no one's going to know about it, Rackets." He took a step closer, covering the girl, and the little rat moved up to get me in line with the silenced gun. "And you've got an envelope I want!"

Well, I guess all dicks who stick their chins out get it sooner or later. But it's hell to go out when there's so damn' many gorgeous fillies loose these days. I had a funny thought at this moment when Death was nudging my shoulder. Mabel was still expecting to hear from

me tonight—and I've never disappointed a dame yet Well. . . .

The coat with my gun was a single leap away. But to dive for it meant I would put Mary Lee in line with the big bruiser's gun. If I could draw their fire *away* from her. . . .

But I guess the little ratty guy intercepted my thoughts. His trigger finger tightened and he said as calm as hell, "Here it comes, shamus—"

I DON'T know how I ever controlled the thrill which jumped through my veins during that next split second. Good old Hannah had ghosted into the doorway directly behind the little guy. With them crazy tortoise-shell cheaters and the somber black dress that fitted like a glove, she looked great! Very coolly, as though she was swatting at a tennis ball, she raised the gun butt in her hand and brought it down swiftly on the little punk's head. At the same instant, she ripped out: "Take the other one, Rackets!"

I did.

At the first sound of her voice, Scarface had whirled. That was his mistake. My fist traveled outward and upward in one steaming arc. My shoulders were behind that wallop and he was going down before his eyes even closed. I had the gat out of his hand before his fingers had gone limp.

Hannah's man had landed on his nose on the rug and looked like a kid trying to stand on his head. Calmly, Hannah toppled him over with her foot. He flattened out like a deflated balloon. A moment later, using sheets from the bed, I had them tied up proper.

Mary Lee had passed out cold. Hannah takes a gander at her tall, slinky form and gives me a dirty look. She snaps: "Do you always have to interview women when they're dressed like this? Or maybe you were powdering her back?"

I said, "Lay off, partner," and reached for my coat. What a dame—Hannah, I mean. Any one seeing these two here would say my associate is some old maid without an emotion left in her lanky form. Lanky, hell!

Beneath that sheet which she calls a dress is a five-foot-nine figure that is sheer luxuriance. Fluff up that combed-back, jet-black hair; put some make-up on skin which is cream smooth and lovely; remove the cheaters and— Well, then she's just darkly beautiful and dangerous. That get-up my sidekick wears when she's sleuthing is only an act; it's a perfect disguise. I asked:

"And how did *you* get in?"

She nods toward the motionless thugs on the floor. "Up the fire escape and into the living room, just like they did. I drove up to this stash just as they started up here."

But I was already headed for the hall door, saying, "Take care of red-head, partner. And ride herd on these two rats until I send up some cops. Give me a half hour, and I'll have the master mind behind this killing tonight headed for the chair."

Hannah calls out, "Who?" but I was already out the door and taking the steps two at a time.

I FOUND my cab driver parked right at my office building after I had hopped another Yellow downtown. He was almost asleep. He said drowsily, "Oh, hello, Daly." Then: "Say, you're paying the bill, fella, but whatinell's the sense of paying for this hack which you ain't using?"

I did a fast one into the rear compartmen, raised the seat cushion and found the envelope which I had placed there before I entered the red-head's apartment. "This," I said, as he gawked at me. "A couple of guys almost got it back a few moments ago, but a smart gal helped me cool them off. I had a hunch some one would try to find this. That's why my friend Larry was bumped tonight. They probably would have searched me, to, but the cops came too soon after that scrap near the club."

I was ripping open the envelope as I talked. Then I stared. I had thought

maybe Larry had a letter in there stating who was behind the racket he was investigating. Now that Mary Lee had said he was a G-man I knew it was something important. All I found was two baggage checks for a check room at Grand Central Station. But then—

"Come on," I ripped out to the driver. "Forty-second and Vanderbilt. Fast!"

Just then the night watchman of my building pops out from the lobby, spots me in the hack and comes hurrying across the sidewalk. He bleats, "Say, Mister Daly. There's a blond-headed wren up in your office and she's—"

I grinned, nodding for the driver to keep going, and called back, "Sure, I know, Pop. I'll be back." He scratched his head—knowing me like he does—and ambles slowly back into the building. We made Grand Central in four minutes. It was close to dawn, and there was a damp, dismal chill in the air. The scars on my face were beginning to burn.

Maybe you've guessed what those two baggage checks were for at the station. Two grips full of evidence against a racket which Larry had been secretly investigating for over a year. Letters, pictures, affidavits, *dope.*

IT WAS a Federal case and I spent half an hour locating the chief of the New York City field office. I gave him the address where to meet me for the finale. He said he would send some G-Men along, but asked me to notify the cops too. They usually work together on these big hauls.

I gave the driver the address, tucked the grips into the back seat, and we rolled uptown again. The law and the Feds were already there and the pinch had been made—without a struggle. I had told the F.B.I. chief that I had all Larry's evidence.

Fat, greasy-looking Pete Costello, owner of the Tit-Tat-Toe Club gave me a murderous leer as the cops dragged him out of his fancy joint. Yeah, he was the master mind behind Larry's killing in the biggest dope-peddling racket in town. He snarled at me: "Maybe they call you the racket buster, Daly, but I'll beat this rap; and when I do—"

I blew smoke into his round, evil eyes. "Nuts, Costello," I said quietly. I tapped the grips which were on the foyer floor, ready for the F.B.I. men to take along. "There's enough evidence in those bags to send you and the two rats at my friend's apartment up for a hundred years."

I turned toward a couple of cops and told them about the thugs at Mary Lee's apartment. Then Chief Wilson, a wiry, sharp-eyed slender guy who is in charge of the G-Men, steps up to me and shakes my hand. He said softly, "Daly, there's rewards totaling five grand for information leading to this bird Costello. You'll be receiving a check."

I went out, found my cab driver and tossed him a fin, saying wearily, "To the office, kiddo. Then we'll call it a night. You got a drink?"

The driver turns around, grinning, saying, "Sure, but don't you ever tell the law." He passes me a half empty pint. His eyes bulge as I kill it in three gulps. I said, "Buy some more out of that five-spot. You really shouldn't drink while driving, you know."

WHEN I entered the office building, the watchman was still all worked up about Mabel. He said excitedly, "Geez, Mister Daly, she went up there and made a lot of noise and I think she's been drinking—"

I found lights on all over the place and in the rear private room which is mine I found Mabel. Earlier in the evening, she must have been plastered. There's still the bottle of rye on my desk and it's a third empty. And brother, that filly must have been plenty mad when I stood her up. She had kicked over everything lying loose around the place, and raised hell in general. Right now she was asleep on the couch.

I took a swig from the bottle, sat down on the couch and forgot that I was tired. I touched her shoulder. Mabel stirred in her sleep, murmuring, "Oh, Rackets—" She woke up.

"Listen, you lousy, two-timing rat—" she let loose with some plain and fancy cursing as she came full awake. I grabbed her and held her hard as hell against me. My lips smothered her barrage of curses.

Against my lips, she tried to cuss and talk. But after a while she gave that up and slowly snuggled up against me. . . .

WHEN the phone rang though, I finally had to answer it, for from the sound of it, the person at the other end had no intentions of giving up trying to get me. It was Hannah.

She said in that biting, sharp tone of hers, "Now look, Rackets Daly, I can stand a lot. But if you think I'm going to stay here all night and play wet nurse to one of your red-heads—"

I was too tired to argue. I answered, "Cripes, partner, I forgot all about you." I hung up and went back to Mabel, grinning, "Come on, Mabel. You gotta scram. That was the boss."

Red-Hot Ice

(Continued from page 29)

Oliver got over the surprise. His voice came cool, not scared. He said, "I don't know what you're talking about, Sarkis. I haven't seen Angelo all day."

"Don't kid me, Oliver."

"Listen," he snapped, "I don't like phones. If you want to talk to me . . ."

I broke in quick. "Forget it. Sorry I got excited. There's a little trouble but I can handle it."

"What . . . ?" he started to say but I hung up.

It wasn't too tight; there were still some holes I couldn't plug. But I had to take the chance. I'd thrown in the bait and I'd have to play it off the cuff from here on. I leaned back in the swivel and cupped my hands behind my head. When I had it all thought out I sat up.

The smoke had cleared and except for the holes in the desk the place wasn't torn up much. Angelo didn't bother me any. He looked as good as the rest of the furniture. I took out four Picayunes and laid them in a row on the blotter. I burned 'em slow and short. When I finished the last one I called Bernstein.

He had left his office but I caught him at home.

"Sam," I told him. "I got a stiff here for you. Yeah, the office. Now wait a minute. I'm leaving, but unless I'm way off I'll be calling you inside an hour. Wait here for it."

He started warning me about technicalities. I cut him short. I know what I'm doing, Marty. This is the only way to play it. Okay, an hour. If I don't come through by then you can stick me under the jail."

I reloaded the .32 clip, turned out the lights and locked the hall door behind me. If Bernstein didn't have a key that would fit it he was the only guy in New York that didn't.

THE Ritz looked the same as last time. Only I was different. No executive stuff. No exit stairs. I rode the elevator all the way to the top and I knocked on the door like I owned the joint.

She must've been standing there waiting. She said, "Who is it?" Low. And I said, "Me, baby."

She opened it but she didn't unlatch the chain until she saw my face. I slid in and closed the door.

"What's nappened, Sam?"

I shook my head. "Inside. We ain't got much time."

She had on gold hostess pajamas and a jade necklace and the perfume. In the lamplight she looked even better than yesterday. She tucked one leg under her on the couch and puckered her forehead.

"Cops?"

"Not yet." I lit her cigarette and one for myself. "Little Angelo got full of snow today. He just took a crack at me."

"Little Angelo?"

"The butler," I said. "It was damn close."

"You mean Vincent's butler?"

"Yeah." I gave her time to think about it. Then I said, "What gives with you and Oliver?"

She frowned at her cigarette. "He's asked me to marry him, Sam."

I didn't show anything; I watched her eyes. "You gonna do it?"

"Yes," she said slowly. "Yes, I think I will."

"Okay, baby, It's your life. You like him as a husband; how do you like him as a dope peddler?"

"That's dirty, Sam."

"Dirty!" I said. "Hah! Me, sure; but not friend Vince. Oh no, he's too smart. Know how they worked it?—Cantrell to Angelo to the customers. Vince never touched the stuff. But he got the dough, and paid off Cantrell's end over a crooked dice table at 17. No contact anywhere, see. If there's a beef it's all Angelo; Vince is horrified. And why not? He's just a good clean kid—as pure, you might say, as snow. Huh, baby?"

She jumped off the couch and got more cigarettes from across the room and when she came back there were red spots on her cheeks. But I could tell she believed me. I said,

"If you were figuring on the social angle, I think you got a bad bet. When this comes out I got an idea the Four Hundred'll be counting heads at around three ninety-nine."

"All right, all right." She snapped her lighter, hard.

"I told you how I worked."

"All *right*. But, I paid you to find the diamond."

"I'm coming to that," I said. "First I got a question. I asked you before. This time I want the truth. Was Oliver really with you last night?"

She studied me through the smoke. Finally she said, "He was earlier. But not at the time the papers said Cantrell. . . . That's what you mean, isn't it?"

I nodded and leaned back. "Here's the story. Oliver is a horse player and a chaser—two hobbies that cost plenty. He ain't lucky. There's more dough going out than's coming in, even with the dope sideline. He borrows from Cantrell. He throws it away. Pretty soon Cantrell gets annoyed. He wants his dough. Then you come along.

"Maybe Oliver figures, what the hell, you got insurance. Anyway he comes back that night and lifts the rock. He gives it to Cantrell and everybody's happy. Then he gets another idea . . ." I dunked my cigarette. "How's it sound so far?"

She was watching me, dazed. "I can't believe it."

"Me neither."

THE voice was high and light and full of cream. It came from the other end of the room, behind me. I saw Honey Hair's eyes go wide and I kept my hands still and I got up very slowly and turned around. It was Joey Chill.

"I told you, heavy boy. You was bowin' your neck."

The Panama was pushed back and he had on the same sport coat with a new yellow swizzle stick for the one he'd left on my desk. He flicked his lips open and moved closer. Lazy. Half-asleep. Just like in the office, only this time he wasn't kidding. He had a Colt Woodsman with the front sight filed off in his hand.

"You can't get away with it, Joey. Me maybe. But not both of us."

He grinned. "I'll manage."

I was watching his eyes and I saw it was coming soon. My hands began to sweat.

"I got a gun, Joey. .22s won't stop me before I can get one into you."

"Where I put 'em they will." He wasn't bragging; they don't use .22s unless they're good.

I said, "You know I'm gonna try," and he said,

"I'm a sport. Go ahead."

His face was set and his shoulders relaxed and I saw his finger take up the slack in the trigger. I didn't have a prayer but I knew I couldn't stall him any longer. I clamped my teeth and then, be-

hind me, Honey Hair moved. For an instant his eyes changed focus. I jumped.

The .22 went off, loud, and something hot kicked me in the chest. Then I was rolling on the floor trying to tear the .32 outa my pocket and listening all the time for him to shoot again. He didn't shoot and I got the automatic clear and jerked around.

He was still standing there, with the Woodsman dangling from his finger, swaying. He had a surprised look on his face and there was a vein showing in his forehead and his mouth was working. But he didn't make a sound. He just swayed farther and farther until he toppled over When he hit, the swizzle sticks rolled out across the rug. In four pieces. They'd been shot through the middle.

I got up and turned around. Honey Hair was holding a little pearl-handled .25 and her eyes were round and dark and she looked at me like I was a ghost. I went over and slid her fingers loose from the gun. She was trembling and she held on tight while I led her to the couch. I sat her down. She started to laugh. High and steady, with nothing at all showing in her eyes. I slapped her easy, four times. She saw me then and she put her her face down in her hands and her shoulders began to shake.

In a little while she got still. She tossed back her hair and wiped at her eyes. She said, "I'm sorry, Sam," and her eyes got wide again. "You're hurt!"

I'd almost forgotten. I took off my coat and shirt. The hole was even with my heart but too far to the left. It wasn't even bleeding much.

She said, "Wait. I'll get some things."

I got half an inch down a Picayune before she came back. She had iodine, bandages and two drinks. She worked fast and she knew what she was doing. Painted and taped, I put on my shirt and got my cigarette off the tray. She curled up in a chair and tasted her drink.

"Scotch," she said. "Sixteen years old. I think we deserve it."

"That was a nice shot," I said. "You saved my life."

"The gun just went off. I was scared silly."

I shook my head. "I threw the night latch when I came in, baby. Joey was here all the time."

She sat up. "Why, he couldn't have been!"

"He could and he was. Because you sent for him right after I called you." I shook ash off the Picayune. "I saw your eyes just now. The hysterics weren't because Joey was dead but because I *wasn't*. You should have given him time for a second shot."

She looked at me and laughed. "You're good, Sam. First Vincent. Now me. Can you make it work for anybody?"

"I like you better."

"Why?"

"Because," I said, "you were married to the guy. Save your breath, baby. I looked it up this afternoon and it's in the records in black and white: Coral Cantrell."

SHE set her drink down on the coffee table and hunched up in the chair, rubbing her elbows. She glanced at me, then dropped her eyes.

"All right, Sam. I held out on you. But don't scare me any more. I married Nick when I first came to New York. It didn't work out. I got a divorce. That's all there is to it."

"Uh-uh," I said. "It don't figure that way."

She gave me a crooked smile and shrugged. "Go ahead then. I suppose I deserve it."

"You and Cantrell were small timers," I said, "but you had a good front. You met Jake Hayes. How, I don't know but it wouldn't be too hard to dig up. Anyway you hooked him, hooked him so solid he wanted to marry you. It was a chance to break into the big time and you took it, even though you were already hitched. Cantrell didn't mind; it was insurance for him against a double cross.

"So you went to Philadelphia and sent back enough dough for him to open 17. Things were going fine. Then Jake had the heart attack." I stopped a second.

"You were crowding your luck a little there, weren't you?"

She frowned but she didn't say anything. She was still rubbing her elbows, not looking at me.

"Well," I went on, "the will was a surprise. He'd tied up the dough in a trust fund, leaving you a yearly income for life. That's a long time. Dangerous. You couldn't drop outa sight like you planned, and you couldn't go back to Cantrell. Tough, but not too tough.

"You'd changed. You'd had a taste of the high life. You'd met Oliver. You wanted to stay on top. A big name. Social position. Cantrell was in the way all along the line. One peep outa him and you're not only up on a bigamy rap, you also have Jake's relatives climbing all over themselves to break the will. So you had a bright idea."

I got out a Picayune. "Bored, baby?"

She gave me a helpless shrug and picked up her drink.

I said, "Cantrell had been yelling for more dough so's he could expand. You sold him the idea of taking the Kimberley Rose. The set-up was perfect and you had it all worked out.

"You left a trail to 17 a blind man could've followed, then you hired me. Nobody had to recommend me. You knew I'd served time and you knew an ex-con is perfect as a fall guy. You hoped maybe I'd tangle with Cantrell and one or the other of us would get cooled. But just to make sure you hired Joey Chill as clean-up man.

"As it turned out you needed him. I didn't tangle with Cantrell but I got him worried. When he called you about it, you arranged the meeting last night and sent Joey to make sure I got there. Then you blasted Cantrell—with my gun.

"It was neat, but I got there before you could get the diamond. Even that didn't matter. I got the diamond and you got me. You didn't make a single mistake, baby. You just had a little bad luck. Before I went out, I caught a whiff of your perfume."

She sat up then and she dropped the helpless stuff and she got hard.

"You make it sound good but how you gonna prove it? Anybody see me go in? Anybody see me come out?"

"You were seeing Cantrell and still keeping the marriage a secret. My guess is he had a secret entrance built into the bedroom. The cops can take it from there."

She shrugged. "Anybody can use an entrance. That doesn't mean anything."

"Fingerprints do."

She looked at me through her eyelashes and I could tell she was purring inside. I grinned.

"Sure, you used gloves but you took 'em off when you went into the water for the diamond. Maybe you thought you couldn't leave prints under water. You were wrong and the float'll prove it."

Her face changed and her eyes got dreamy and all of a sudden I could smell the perfume again.

"You're talking, Sam," she said, low and steady, "but you don't mean it. If you did you'd have brought the cops."

I said, "Don't kid yourself about how it's gonna be. You might vamp a jury outa the Cantrell rap except that when they get to thinking about old Jake Hayes and that heart attack I don't think they're gonna feel so good.

"It's the big jolt, baby. With clamps on your arms and legs and your head shaved and one little wire running down. The big jolt, baby. You can't miss."

HER hands were white on the chair arms and there was a little pulse jumping in her throat. Her voice came out like it had to tear itself loose from her throat.

"You won't do it, Sam! You won't! You love me."

"Maybe I do," I said. "But that don't matter now. I'll get over it."

"We can go away."

"You forget, baby. I'm on the hook."

"Can't we put Vincent up? You can fix it."

"No."

She looked puzzled. Like a child. Her head twisted from side to side. "I don't understand. I couldn't help it. Things

kept pushing at me and I had to push back. I didn't want to hurt anybody but they kept pushing. It's like a dream, Sam. Things pushing you . . ." She was staring around now, as though there were things in the room I couldn't see. "Can't you help me, Sam?"

All of a sudden there was something working in my throat and I wanted to go over and take her in my arms. But I didn't. I said,

"No, baby. Nobody can help you now."

She came out of it slowly. Her eyes got bright. "You mean it, don't you?"

"Yes," I said. "I mean it."

"Okay, Sam. I can lose. It's too late now, anyway. Too late for anything but a drink. One toast . . . before you call the cops."

I shook my head. "Not this time."

Her mouth twisted and she took a long time putting her drink on the table. "I guess I should have known you wouldn't." Her head snapped up then and she had that funny look on her face I'd seen once before—like the bones were showing through.

"The big jolt, you called it, Sam. I don't think I'd like that. I don't think I'd like that at all."

She came over to me slowly, her eyes never leaving my face. She said, "I'll drink the toast. To us."

She picked up my glass and held it to her lips. Then, smiling a little, she drank it to the bottom. When she put the glass down she looked as if she'd been hit in the face with a bag of powdered chalk.

"You can believe me now," she said, barely whispering. "I love you, Sam."

Her arms went up around my neck and her face tilted. I kissed her. I kissed her and I held her tight while the shudders hit her; and I could feel her screaming inside but she wouldn't let it out. And finally her arms slid down and she was heavy against me.

I picked her up and laid her on the couch and turned out the lights. The moon was up and the Venetians laid gold slats across her face. She looked beautiful, more beautiful than she ever had before. And I could see it in her now—the child in a dream. I stood there a while and finally I said,

"So long, baby. They won't be pushing any more."

The phone was just across the room. I dialed Bernstein and while I waited I got out my handkerchief and wiped my mouth. Her perfume was in the room, but I couldn't smell it. I couldn't smell anything but the scent of bitter almonds from her lips.

She'd cut the Scotch with cyanide.

Death Shapes the Frame

(Continued from page 45)

in the cloth down near my left side pocket and it stuck there.

I rammed Gerald's silk-waistcoated solar plexus with the tips of my rigid fingers. Gerald was tougher than he looked and stayed on his feet. He tried to get at the thin knife that was stuck in my coat so that he could have another unfair go at me.

I brought up my right knee for the sure-fire crippler and butted Gerald under the chin with the top of my head at the same time. That would take the starch out of anybody. Gerald was no exception. He smashed backwards among the music stands, his body an agonized twist. Then he groveled on the floor for the long count.

Customers and musicians boiled out of their chairs. I didn't know whether it was I or Gerald they wanted to tear apart. I didn't take any chances. I started slugging. And then the police came and broke up a beautiful brawl.

FINK was treating us like the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. He gave Laura and me the two best chairs in his office at Homicide. But I knew that this cordial veneer would soon peel off. Fink can't help acting like Fink.

I was explaining. "Actually, Gerald *wanted* that divorce from Julia. But he wasn't letting on that he did. He was going to get sympathy—from all his girl friends—by being a little martyr. Being married to Julia did hamper his movements. Free of her, he could play as friskily as he liked. The long puss he put on for all concerned was only an act. Underneath, he was happy about the whole thing. He fooled everybody. Even his old man fell for it. Then Papa Henstowe unintentionally did the worst thing imaginable when he talked Julia into a reconciliation with Gerald. He was signing her death warrant. Because when Gerald got an eyeful of Julia walking into that suite instead of you, Laura, he knew that the divorce was all off. He was still hog-tied by marriage. So his booze-fogged mind decided to end it another way. He had a set of those sticker-batons. He always carried one around with him as a life-preserver in case some irate husband, like Reinecke, showed up.

All he had to do was jockey his wife into position in the bedroom and let her have it with the little sword-stick. Then when we barged in he played possum."

"You didn't look in the right place, Fink. After Gerald stabbed Julia he put the bâton together again and then he hid it. I'll tell you where he hid it. He propped Julia's body up in a sitting position and tilted her head far back. Her dead jaw was relaxed. Her mouth dropped open. Gerald thrust the baton end-first into her mouth and down her esophagus, using the same trick a sword-swallower does when he wraps himself around an eighteen-inch blade."

"Yep," I said. "Gerald shoved it down far enough so that you couldn't see it by looking in her mouth, yet not as far down as her stomach. When the Health Department basket carried the body away from the hotel, it was also carrying away the knife. A routine autopsy doesn't include an esophagotomy—a gullet-slitting to you, Fink—so the medical examiner won't find the weapon either, unless he gets instructions where to look." I paused to let this sink home.

Then I said, "I kept telling you—it was in the bag!"

Toy of Doom

(Continued from page 63)

But the clerk sold it to Donna Kay—and that must have made Potter frantic.

"It was Potter who called Donna Ray twice, trying to get her to sell the doll back to him. When she wouldn't, he decided he would have to get it back himself. So, while Donna was in the middle of her act in the Gold Room, Potter climbed the fire-escape to her room and stole the doll."

Kenny Kane's eyes narrowed.

"And killed Donna when she surprised him in the act."

Diamond shook his head.

"No. I don't figure it that way. I don't think Potter killed Donna. I think he stole the doll without interruption, and that somebody else came up to her room right after he did, seeking the same thing. When this second party couldn't find the doll, he messed the place up looking for it. It was this second party who was surprised by Donna. There was a struggle, and the killer finished her by hitting her on the head with the alabaster statue."

"What makes you think there was a second party?" asked Kane sharply.

"Just one thing," said Diamond easily. "One thing that doesn't fit into the idea that Potter killed Donna Ray. One thing that says somebody else did it."

Diamond had just finished talking when he heard a door open at the rear of the store. A moment later another person came into the room. It was Martha Lane!

"The missing link," murmured Diamond softly. "Martha was married to Potter. She knew he was acting as a fence for jewel thieves. Being a singer, she tried out with your band—and you two must have fallen for each other. In a moment of confidence she must have told you of her husband's racket. And you thought it was right down your alley, didn't you, Kane? You saw that by cottoning up to Martha, you would eventually be able to get your hands on some of that valuable ice. So you waited until this opportunity presented itself. You heard, through Martha, of the coming shipment in the lavender doll—and you've been trying to get your mitts on it ever since."

IN the pale light Kane's face went grim, his lips drawing tight. He backed up a couple of steps, motioned with the gun to Martha.

"Get over with Diamond!" he barked. "Guess I'll have to finish you both now!"

A tiny, startled cry escaped Martha's lips. She stumbled to Diamond's side, eyes wide in horror. Kane covered them both with the gun.

"Kenny!" It was Martha's voice, pleading. "You can't do this! The plans we made—"

Diamond grinned crookedly.

"What's the matter, Martha? Is Kane giving you the old doublecross? The way it looks to me, you two must have been in this together. You were planning to steal the ice, then, when you got the divorce, marry each other. Only Kane doesn't look in a marrying mood just now."

"You dirty doublecrossing sneak!" she cried. "You were playing me for a sucker all the time! You were using me, knowing I could find out from Neil when a new shipment of diamonds was due from Europe! You really figured on stealing the stuff yourself, and leaving me flat! When you left the band early tonight, I got suspicious and followed you here. It's a good thing I did!" She whirled, facing Diamond savagely. "Kane killed Donna Ray!" she cried. "He went up to steal the doll, but Neil had beat him to it. When Donna surprised him in her room, he hit her with the statue!"

Diamond just shook his head slowly.

"Kane is a doublecrosser and a thief, Martha, but not a killer. You forget one thing—Kane's perfect alibi. He was on the stage with his band between the time Donna did her song and the time she failed to come back from her room, so that he couldn't have killed her. The way it really happened was this. You and Kane were in cahoots in the attempt to steal the doll, which you had learned was sold by mistake to Donna. So while Donna was on the stage, Kane sent you up to get the doll. Donna crossed things up by going back to her room. You were in the midst of searching the place when she walked in on you. There was a fight, and *you* hit her with the statue!"

"No! You can't prove—"

Diamond went on, ignoring her.

"There was one thing about Donna's death that convinced me from the first that a woman had killed her. That was the long red scratches on her face. Had Donna been in a struggle with a man, he would have beat her savagely, true. He would have blackened her eye, beat at her face, hit her with the statue —*but he wouldn't have scratched her!* Scratching is typically feminine. Only a woman would have scratched."

A sudden snarl came from Kane. Diamond looked into the muzzle of the gun, and felt uncomfortable.

"You hit the truth, Diamond. Martha did kill her—and that was a bad move. Anyway, I'm the guy who is ending up with the necklace, and you two aren't going to live to tell the story of how I got it."

He shoved the gun out, then, aggressively, and Diamond started to count his seconds. Then Martha went stark, raving mad. With a shrill cry she hurled herself

at Kane. Kane, startled, switched the gun toward her and pulled the trigger. Angry flame leaped at Martha and she doubled over.

It was all the time Diamond needed. His knife had slipped out of his pocket, blade opening as it came. In a split-second it was headed for Kane's exposed breast. The blade bit deep and Kane staggered away with a bellow of pain.

Diamond moved in and finished Kane with a right on the jaw. Kane went down in an agonized heap at the same time that the back door burst open and Sergeant Mullin, with two cops, barged in. Mullin glared dubiously at the carnage around him, then swept Diamond with a disgusted gaze.

"Every time I see you, wise guy, there are corpses around," he said mournfully. "What happened?"

"Neither of them are dead," he replied. Then he told Mullin briefly what had occurred. Mullin chewed morosely on his unlighted cigar. When Diamond was finished, he scratched his head.

So that clears Potter of murder, and puts him on the docket as a fence," he mumbled. "Looks like you hit the jackpot again, Diamond—although I don't know what you got for all your efforts."

Diamond thought of the one thousand dollar fee he would never collect and grinned lopsidedly.

"All we got out of it was satisfaction," he murmured.

Mullin looked at him queerly.

"We? Who's we?"

Diamond snapped the blade of his knife shut and dropped it in his pocket.

"Sharpy and I, that is," he said. "Mind if I totter along, Mullin?"

Murder on the Bench

(Continued from page 81)

but the patent owner says the war is over now."

"What will happen?"

Manners shrugged. "Halliday will have to stop manufacturing guns. You met him the other night, Steve. It's his company. He freely admits he hasn't a leg to stand on now that the war is over."

"Halliday?" Bunch murmured thoughtfully. "I don't like him."

"There are things about him I don't like," Manners admitted.

Driving back to town, Bunch wondered if Harry Gardner had had any luck with Helen. He turned on the radio, listened to a senate committee blame the steel shortages on the commies.

"It should get better," the announcer said, "when heavy shipments of guns to foreign powers taper off at the end of the quarter."

"Then you can have that new car," Bunch muttered sourly, "with overhead drive."

That was when he noticed the car following him. It was a black sedan, but there were two cars between them and he couldn't make out who was driving it. He braked slowly, waited for one of the cars to overtake him, pass. He slid by a down road, off the parkway. The car behind him came up, close, blocked his view in the mirror. He swung his head, to see the sedan disappearing into the downroad, swing into the underpass.

Cursing quietly, Bunch rode on the accelerator. The next turn-off was a half mile ahead and the traffic was too heavy to try turning. He headed for the Coolridge, found Harry Gardner in the lobby.

"I've been thinking, Steve," Harry drawled, "they staked this hotel just for that play in the room. They'll never show here again, and I don't think that Helen girl will, either. They've warned her."

"Forget her," Bunch snapped. "There's no one by that name. It was just a realistic touch for the police to find, to prove that June Cochrane went out to Manners house."

Harry Gardner lifted his eyebrows but didn't comment. Bunch went on, "Judge

Manners refuses to be scared out of town. I want you to get out there right away and stay on his tail every minute from now on."

Harry nodded. "Getcha, Steve."

"And be prepared for trouble, Harry," Bunch warned softly.

BUNCH had dinner, then drove to his apartment. The phone was ringing insistently when he opened the door. He strode to it, listened to Harry Gardner's calm, steady voice.

"I'm calling from Manners' house, Steve. The judge is dead."

Sudden anger flanged Bunch as he waited.

"Shot through the heart at his desk. The butler is dead on the veranda. A knife in his back. It must have happened just before I drove up. A car was driving out the back alley. A sedan, but I didn't recognize the significance at the time.

"A black Lincoln Continental?" Bunch asked.

"It wasn't that. I didn't get a good look, but a girl was driving. Think it could be Helen?"

"That was a set-up," Bunch snapped. "You stay there and clean things up. I'll handle it."

Ed Halliday kept a penthouse bachelor apartment of some ten or twelve rooms. Bunch stalked from the elevator, stood with his finger on the buzzer until a sodden creature who was probably a butler, opened the door.

"Halliday here?"

"He's not in, sir. You may leave. . . ."

Bunch pushed through the door, taking him by the lapels.

"I'll describe a girl to you, and you'll name her," he growled.

The undertaker's face lengthened haughtily, then dropped apart as he grew frightened. Bunch described June Cochrane.

"You must mean Miss Sloan," he quivered, "a friend of Mr. Halliday's."

"Where does she live?" Bunch demanded.

"In East Thirty-eighth Street. . . ."

Bunch took the address, pushed the man slowly to what looked like a closet.

Her name was Jean Sloan, according to the mailbox in the vestibule. Bunch took the automatic elevator to the sixth floor, pounded the thick rug to apartment 6-E. He heard voices, then knocked.

The voices stopped and feet came to the door, hesitated, then the knob twisted and the door opened two inches on a chain. The girl that was looking at him through the crack grew wide-eyed and frightened as he registered on her. It was June Cochrane!

She started to slam the door, but Bunch was ready, crouching for it. He threw his weight against it, felt it snap back against the fragile chain, felt the chain break, the door fling open. The momentum carried Bunch on into the room. A shrill cry of terror came from June Cochrane as he plunged past her. Halliday was frozen on a sofa at the far side of the room, his face turning white. Maxie and Tip, who'd been sitting in chairs opposite Halliday, were coming to their feet, guns in their hands.

They shouted at Halliday, cursing Bunch, stabbing twin jets of fire at him. Bunch veered to the right, dropping to his knee, his own gun blazing back. He saw a small round hole appear in Tip's forehead and two slugs tear open the throat of big Maxie. Maxie gurgled horribly, his eyes rolling as he lurched toward Bunch. His gun slipped from his fingers, then he pitched forward on his face, dead.

Bunch was standing now, moving forward almost in front of Halliday, still sitting motionless and horror stricken on the sofa. He stared up at Bunch's gun, croaked:

"Don't kill me, Bunch. I'm unarmed."

Bunch motioned with his gun to the girl. "Sit down beside him," he ordered. "This time you'll stay dead."

"Like you killed Manners," he muttered. "You tried to frame him into thinking he'd committed murder. But when you went to his house tonight, to

persuade him to adjourn your case, he wouldn't frame. You knew you'd lose the case, but you wanted to postpone it until after you'd finished shipping guns to the commies."

Halliday moved forward on the sofa.

"You're a smart man, Bunch," he began desperately. "We don't collect any money on the contract until we've completed deliveries. There's several million dollars involved, and we'll lose every penny of it. All I needed was another month, but Manners wouldn't allow another adjournment."

"Did Manners know why you wanted it?"

"Not until tonight," Halliday said, working his lips. "I tried to get him out of town so he couldn't try the case. Then, tonight, I tried to buy him. He wouldn't buy, and I threatened to ruin him with the picture, but he was obstinate. There was no alternative, Bunch." Halliday paused, continued in a low, wheedling voice. "It means a lot of money. With Manners out of the way, I'll complete the contract. You keep your mouth shut and name your price, Bunch. I'll make you wealthy."

Bunch's gun lashed out suddenly, whipping red gashes on Halliday's face. Halliday slumped back, his hands coming up to cover his face. June Cochrane looked at him for a moment, her eyes wide. Then she turned her face to Bunch, a slow smile appearing on her red, pouty mouth. She started to get up.

"Save it, honey," Bunch said dully. His mind was clouded, his senses slow. As he picked up the phone, he wondered if he could keep them alive until the police got there.

Blast and Be Damned!

(Continued from page 89)

It was the slender, yellow-haired girl. The one who worked in Callahan's legitimate office downtown! The girl who had visited Terry's apartment tonight!

"You—!" he choked.

"Yes. Listen!" she spoke swiftly, hurriedly. "There's something you must know. I'm not a gang moll. I'm a Federal investigator. I got a job in Callahan's office last month, and I've been trying to get the goods on him. Today, when you called at his office, Callahan was all prepared for you. That pock-faced gorilla had already warned him you were coming."

"I know that!" Terry whispered harshly.

"Well, after you left I overheard Callahan planning to make you bomb your own store; plan to kidnap and murder you afterward. That's why I came to your apartment this evening. I hoped to keep you from your eleven o'clock appointment with Callahan at the livery-stable. But I couldn't tell you my real identity —I'm under oath not to reveal my Federal connections unless it's absolutely necessary. So I tried to hold you . . . as best I could. . . ."

"Good gosh!" Terry whispered. A flooding warmth seeped through his veins.

As the girl leaned over him in the darkness, he could feel the softness of her lovely body brushing against him through her dress. The contact thrilled him . . . she had a knife in her fingers. She was slicing his bonds—

Then he was free!

"Come! The window!" she whispered.

She went over the sill, hit the ground. Terry leaped after her. Caught up with her. Slipped an arm about her lithe waist. As they ran, he said: "And you took a chance, came out here to save me—?"

"Y—yes!"

BEFORE she could utter another word, something happened. The front door of the farmhouse smashed open. Somebody yelled: "There they go! He got away—and there's a dame with him!"

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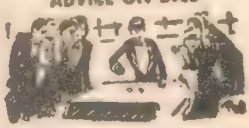

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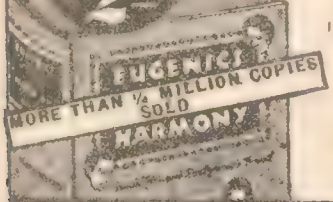

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Then hell broke loose.

Automatics barked, spat flame. Slugs sang past Terry's ears. He cursed; reached out, tripped the girl, flung her to the ground. Abruptly he realized something. He was still wearing that white interne's jacket. Its whiteness loomed large, made a perfect target. . . .

As he flung himself down on the bare ground, he struggled with the coat, slipped out of it. He balled it into a hard lump—and threw it as far from him as his strength permitted. Threw it straight at the farmhouse.

It sailed through the air. Hit the porch. And even as it struck, Terry remembered that second pineapple in the jacket's pocket! The bomb he had not used!

He flattened himself. To the yellow-haired girl he screamed: *"Look out!"*

And then it happened. The coat struck the porch. There was an ear-thundering explosion. It semed as if the whole front of the farmhouse became an unchained hell of flames. There were screams, moans —and finally, a silence broken only by the crackling of the mounting fire as it destroyed the house. . . .

"Heavens!" Terry whispered. "Spike and his mob wiped out! Killed, every one of them! By one of their own bombs . . .!"

In the yellow-flaring light of the burning house, he lifted the girl to her feet. When she had fallen, her tight frock had split open, and he could feel the warm softness of her skin as he enfolded her trembling form in his arms.

He pulled her close and kissed her, tasted the moist sweetness of her mouth Then he led her to the parked ambulance in which they would drive back to Crestwood. "Tell me . . ." he whispered gently. "Why did you risk your life to rescue me . . .?"

She looked into his eyes. "Because . . . when you . . . kissed me in your apartment this evening, I . . . I had a strange feeling I've never had before!"

"You mean . . . maybe you could care for me?"

She smiled. "Why don't you try to find out?"

Homicide Horns In

(Continued from page 103)

all, Humphrey" That was when I came back with the bowl of ice. I mixed us both a drink. I said, "Sure. Well, no, no theories. Honey, I know who killed Richmond, and I know who killed Hulda!"

Her breast rose and fell, her eyes were starry. She said, "Deever?"

I shook my head. "Nope, it wasn't Deever. He knew Belle was Corey's girl. Hulda caught it because the killer thought she was Corey's girl, not Belle!"

"Where does Grimes come in, honey? It doesn't make much sense so far! Everybody knew Corey was moving out with Belle!"

"Belle phoned Hulda and said she couldn't come to the apartment tonight, that Grimes had found out all. So what? I figure Grimes got on his high horse and beat it over there. But he didn't find Corey there at all. He found the killer. You see when the killer answered the doorbell, Hulda was already dead on the bed. Grimes didn't want to tip his hand, he sat down and had a drink with the killer. Bye and bye maybe he got a look in the bedroom. The killer knocked him off and scrammed. But Grimes wasn't clear dead! Does that make more sense?"

"Well, in a way, it's logical. Of course you couldn't prove any of it. Were there really three glasses?"

I nodded. "The killer and Hulda probably had a drink first. That's where the lipstick came in, Hulda's glass. Then the killer went to work. Afterward, Grimes had a drink when he came."

"Two glasses without lipstick," she mused. "Mmmm. Grimes was one man; who was the other?"

"No," I went on, "we're going the wrong way. Who smacked me on the head and took the glasses?"

She whispered, "Don't talk! To hell with it! Kiss me, darling!"

I reached over to the table and pulled over the note Hulda had got and made Geraldine read it. I said, "Poor Hulda. She said detectives found out things from

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typewritten notes. Now look at this one." I pulled another one, identically the same, toward us, said, "This would stand up in court, Geraldine. Both notes were written on the same typewriter!"

You could have heard a Luger drop.

SHE finally whispered, "All right, honey. They were both written on my typewriter. You wouldn't make trouble for me after what's happened?"

I said, "A little while ago we said Hulda was killed by someone that thought she, Hulda, was Corey's girl. You didn't know different until I told you!"

I tossed the picture at her. "This was in your apartment, too, babe." It was a picture of Corey, in all his glory. Down in one corner it said, "To the heart of my heart, with all of my heart, forever and ever. Bobbykins."

"Look, Geraldine. You thought Hulda was the reason Corey didn't play with you any more, didn't you? First you wrote her the note. Then maybe you found out Corey was going to her apartment tonight. You went to her performance, you trailed her, the rest happened like I said. You even fixed her up like a clown! Nobody but a jealous woman would have done that! You figured Corey would find her that way!"

"Humphrey! How could you, how could you!" She began to blubber and cry.

I said, "Bawling won't do you any good, kid. You murdered Hulda like a fiend. You socked it to Richmond because he looked in the bedroom! You followed me back upstairs to the apartment, clouted me, then called the cops twice! Once to get Corey in bad and next to call them to the apartment! You ditched those glasses first. You—hey! What the hell!"

She pointed the gun at me and snarled, "You fool, did you think I'd come here without a rod? Stand up!"

MY ROD was hanging in its holster on the back of the chair across the room. I stood up. She stood up, too. "Get my clothes," she snapped, "and put them on me! I'll blow you higher than a kite."

And by gosh, I did it! I had to do it!

Who wants a female fiend to blow him higher than a kite. She got a kick out of it, and during that time she admitted everything. Richmond had come just as she finished with Hulda. He was looking for Corey. She got him to sit down. He finally figured Corey was hiding in the bedroom and looked. She put the scissors in his back and left him for dead.

"That damned Corey," she raged. "I'll clout you or kill you before I leave. I'm getting him before I fade out of the picture. He used me, the louse used me and he used my brains, then threw me over like an old shoe. I tried to get even by giving away or selling all his damned precious information and city secrets, but he got suspicious and kept his mouth shut. I just couldn't stand it any more. Okay, you through?"

The glass broke out in the fire-escape window. A voice yelled, "Drop it, babe!" And somebody kicked my front door. I was too busy to listen. I dove in.

By and by she was on the floor, nice and quiet, and I was blowing on my fingers, and Kilbane was laughing, saying, "You sure looked funny dressing that big babe! Good thing I didn't trust you and kept a man to tail you, wasn't it?"

I growled, "I'll get even, Kilbane. You outside all the time while I was slipping little things and gadgets on her!"

He tried to look aggrieved. "I had to listen to all her confession, didn't I? There were three of us there and three at the door. She—Why, hello, Mr. Corey!"

He winked at me and stuck out his hand. He said, "Mr. Humphrey, I must ask your pardon. I really thought you were the leak in my office. Now you may have your job back any time, we'll let bygones be bygones. I am sorry I was forced to chastise you physically!"

I didn't even look at his hand. I smacked him with a left and followed with a right. I am not sure, it happened too fast, but once I think Kilbane caught him and held him up, pushed him back at me. I do know Kilbane let it ride three or four minutes before stopping it.

That Kilbane he ain't a bad guy.

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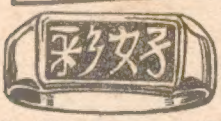

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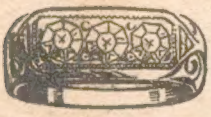

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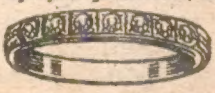

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